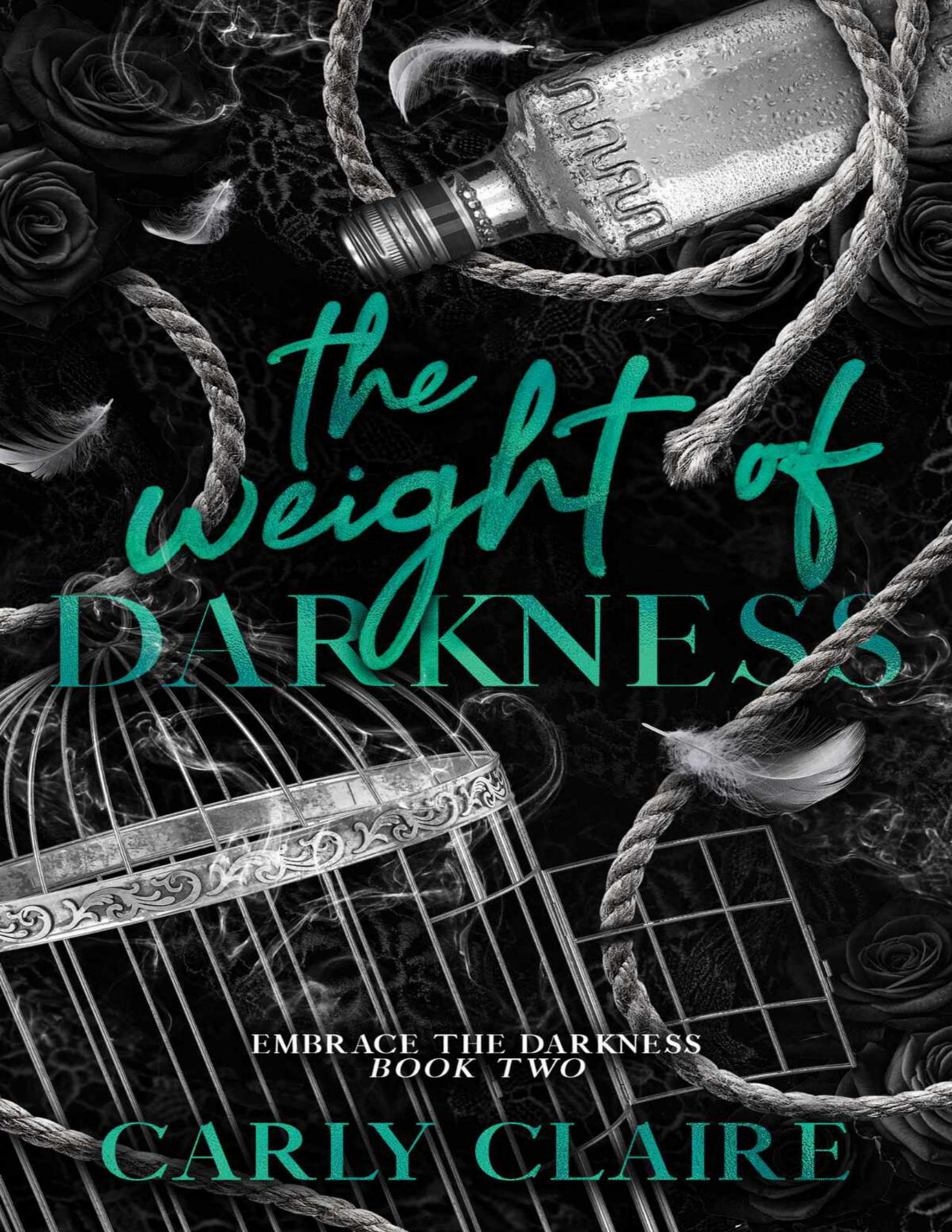
the weight of
DARKNESS
EMBRACE THE DARKNESS
BOOK TWO
CARLY CLAIRE

The Weight of Darkness

Carly Claire

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2024 by Carly Claire, Black Rain Press.

Cover Design by Kirsty Still, The Pretty Little Design Co.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

1. Remy
2. Claire
3. Remy
4. Claire
5. Remy
6. Claire
7. Remy
8. Claire
9. Remy
10. Claire
11. Remy
12. Claire
13. Claire
14. Remy
15. Remy
16. Claire
17. Remy

18. Claire
19. Remy
20. Claire
21. Remy
22. Claire
23. Remy
24. Claire
25. Remy
26. Claire
27. Claire
28. Remy
29. Claire
30. Claire
31. Remy
32. Claire
33. Remy
34. Claire
35. Remy
36. Claire
37. Remy
38. Claire
39. Claire
40. Remy
41. Claire
42. Remy
43. Claire
44. Claire

45. Remy
46. Claire
47. Remy
48. Claire
49. Claire
Join the Coven!

OceanofPDF.com

To the petty little bitch inside each of us who wishes it was perfectly acceptable to go around stabbing people who truly deserve it. Society may frown upon it, but I understand you.

OceanofPDF.com

If you read the first book (and I am assuming you did) you'll know this series was designed to take you deeper and darker with each installation. The Weight of Darkness deals heavily with the effects of trauma, many of which are mental. To that end, it's not as emotionally heavy as A Taste of Darkness, but it *is* still intense. Please be mindful of your own mental health and read the trigger warnings. Some of the themes that may be upsetting include, but are not limited to:

Trauma Processing
Anxiety
Birth Control Tampering
Torture
Human Trafficking
Poisoning
And a Cliff Hanger Ending that will give you a book hangover.
You've been warned.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Sex isn’t the only thing worth living for. There’s also honor. Some people would even say love, though I’m not one of them. Don’t get me wrong; I love my sister. But if I ever grow tired of waking up every day spinning wheels, she wouldn’t be enough to make me stay. Maybe that sounds awful—she means everything to me, but some days *my everything* seems so small in the grand scheme of the greater world.

Rhea told me she loves Claire like family, and she proved that point pretty well when she thought I had done something to harm her best friend. I should have known then that she was serious, that her best friend was firmly off limits. But I was already in too deep with Claire to walk away, and when I got her to safety, it was like something in me decided that my job was to protect her.

I’m trying. In the only way I know how, I’m trying. And not only has it not helped, but I’m also pretty sure it’s only made things worse. Judging by the way Claire hightailed it out of the guest house, I’d say she’s ashamed. The question is, of what? Of me? Of killing someone who didn’t deserve to breathe the same air as us, as her?

I shouldn’t let it bother me. She just needs time to adjust; everything has happened so fast that she’s in a freefall. I’m sure that time will help her start to process things, but I don’t know if she’ll ever be able to accept the darkness that forged me. I hadn’t exactly planned on letting her in, but Jovich opened that door when he betrayed me. I could have denied it all, told her that Jovich had done it because he wanted the money, and

pretended I wasn't involved in the world that tried to consume her. But Claire is smart, and if I denied it, it wouldn't exactly give me an opportunity to protect her or Rhea. There's no way she'd be able to reconcile what comes next if she thought I was truly innocent—which, to be fair, she hasn't ever seemed to think.

From the beginning, something about Claire has entranced me. She was a bright spot in my darkness, and I found myself drawn to her light. But now I'm worried that light may have burned out… or worse, maybe I snuffed it myself.

I stand and dress, looking past the blood that's dried on my flesh, russet against my skin. And it's all over my skin… she painted me with the blood of her tormentor. Something about it feels fucking addictive… like she baptized me in it and I've been born again with the purpose of existing for her. I can already feel my cock tightening again at the memory and the evidence of long strokes she left on me.

I've never relished the killing part, but watching her take back her power was so fucking sexy I'm not sure I can ever kill someone without getting hard again. I groan, restless with thoughts of her, and pick up my phone.

I've already replaced Jovich's speed dial, so when I press the number, it rings once before Dimitri answers.

"Remy?"

"Giante's gone." I say, cutting right to the chase. "The place is ready to be cleaned up."

"I'm on it." Dimitri answers without a second of hesitation. "And the other one?"

The other one.

The one still tied up in my basement.

Davos' son.

My fucking half-brother.

It's more than I want to consider, but I can't deny it. Davos was friends with my father for a long time. I have seen and dealt with a lot of nasty shit, but to think that my mother would have had any willful involvement with such a monster is nearly impossible to stomach. Even worse is the possibility that she *hadn't* been a willing participant in whatever hellish union resulted in Wes' life.

I've suspected since the day of her death that it hadn't been the cancer that killed her. We'd barely even wrapped our heads around the fact that she

was sick before she died, and neither Rhea nor I were allowed to see her body. She was cremated the same day she passed. I blinked, and in the next instant, they were saying my father was picking up her ashes. I never raised my suspicions with my sister because I didn't want her any more involved in our fucked-up family than she already is by virtue of her birth, so I let her believe the lie she'd been fed. I was already trapped in the life they had chosen for me, and if the illusion of compliance keeps Rhea safe, it's a small price to pay.

I played the part of a dutiful son, a soldier in this war, for months before I saw the opportunity to take something from them. It was small, a test to see if anyone noticed. They didn't, so I took more. I forged transactions here and there and even intercepted a few of their auctions, having their 'cargo' shipped to secure locations under aliases of other buyers. Dimitri had dutifully helped me set free three different women in the past two years, something that we stopped as soon as Jovich started poking around. Three is not even a ripple in the shark-infested water. We'd have kept going if we could.

I suppose killing my own wife was a step too far. That's what put them on my radar… my *father*.

With both Jovich and my father gone, I could have gone back to infiltrating the company and freeing more women from the sudden bonds of slavery. But Jovich messed everything up by involving Claire, and now Davos is a very real threat. There's no world where he doesn't come for her, or at least send his minions after her. And there's no world in which I let him get away with hurting her again.

Fortunately, I have a bargaining chip in my basement.

"Boudreaux?" Dimitri says, and I realize I still haven't answered him.

"Nothing yet." I say, scrubbing a hand over my face. "I'll let you know when I figure it out."

Dimitri hangs up and I take my time dressing, sure to give enough time between Claire's departure and mine. I don't care if Rhea catches us together. She surely suspected that something was going on between Claire and I after I'd put her best friend up in my bed to heal and all but refused to leave her alone. But I can't have my sister poking her head around in the guesthouse, so I'll attempt discretion.

The house is quiet as I trudge up the stairs, and when I pass the girls' rooms, not a sound comes from either of them. A strip of light illuminates

the space under Claire's door, where Rhea's is dark. I can't help but wonder what she is doing. Staring at the ceiling awash in regret? Crying softly into her pillow? Scrolling silently through her phone looking for a distraction?

No, I forgot she doesn't have her phone. I'll have a new one ordered for her. And this time, I'll make sure the GPS is on *her* phone… just in case.

She's been in my bed the last day, and though I'd slept in the chair to give her space, I'll miss her presence, watching her chest rise and fall, knowing that she's safe. I have the camera, but it's only good as long as I can stay awake to watch her from it. Before I could hear her every breath.

After I shut my door, I wait behind it a moment in case she comes to join me. But Claire was pretty deliberate when she left me, so I should know better than to expect anything.

I strip down and throw my clothes in a trash bag under the sink, careful not to mix them with my laundry where Elaine would see the blood-soaked garments and likely have some questions that would be tough to answer. I'll have to make sure Claire does the same.

As I languish under the spray of the shower, I think of her wild eyes, the palpable mix of fear and excitement when she'd thrown herself at me.

We've been playing push and pull all week, and finally, she gave in to the mutual desire. It was absolutely worth the wait, worth the back and forth we went through to get to that moment, but I can't fight the slightest disappointment trying to close around me. She deserves better than what I gave her—more than a hasty hook up in the guest house. I want to take my time with her, explore every inch of what she has to offer, taste every drop of her arousal, feel every gasp against my neck when I push into her deeper and deeper.

The look in her eyes as I'd driven her to the edge had been one of freedom, of ecstasy. Though she could feel herself falling, she hadn't been scared in the moment. It's not the fall that's frightening—it's what comes when you land, whether in a heap or on your feet knowing the impact will shatter you.

I know, no matter how scared she may have been, no matter how weary her soul was after the kidnapping, that whether I'd meant to or not, I pulled Claire into my world.

Some people live in the light, afraid to step out of the space that it covers. Others thrive in the dark. It's clear to see that she's had a taste of the darkness, but is a single taste enough?

The selfish part of me hopes not.
I've had a taste of her, and I know that it won't be enough.
I want more.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I watch, holding a stale breath in my lungs, as the shadow passes my door and carries on down the hall. After a moment, Remy's door shuts quietly, and I let go of the breath that was caught in my lungs.

I feel strange, and I'm not even sure why. From my brain attempting to process everything that's happened since… well, since that night at the Piazza? From Remy's touch, his kiss that left my lips feeling swollen and tingling? From the murder I just committed? Or maybe it's more physical than any of that. Maybe I simply hit my head and am just now feeling the effects? Maybe it's a lingering side-effect of whatever Mack shot into my veins to subdue me when Jovich abandoned me to monsters?

Whatever 'it' is, it feels like a finger dusting my spine, eyes trained on the back of my neck, the distinct feeling of being exposed, vulnerable. My shoulders itch, tense with something I can't name. I'm not sure what scares me the most… the fact that I have it in me to do something so heinous, or the fact that I actually *liked* it?

Because if I'm honest with myself, I *did* like it.

Killing Eric gave me a catharsis of sorts. Remy saw it firsthand when I threw myself at him, drunk on the adrenaline because I hadn't even had the decency to pretend that I was horrified with what I did. I mean, I am horrified, but I'm sure it didn't look like I was. What kind of person commits murder and then throws themself at their accomplice like a sex-starved whore? Surely only the most perverse, wicked people to walk the earth would do something so awful.

I've known I'm damaged goods for years. As a child who seemed to connect with multiple families but never got adopted, I'd simply come to the conclusion that there was something wrong with me. It had become more and more evident with time, and I thought it had reached its pinnacle when I was subjected to the Giante's house. They seemed to despise me more than anyone I'd ever met, and I'd eventually just assumed I was the problem. When he hurt me, he even said that I was. I thought I could solve it with a handful of pills and a knife, but that clearly didn't resolve anything. In my recovery, I started to believe that maybe I wasn't broken, but part of a broken system.

Meeting Rhea my freshman year had been a confirmation of as much. She's allowed me to live these last three years as if I'm vindicated, as if I'm normal and whole and worthy. Just being a part of her light had me believing that I *wasn't* the darkness, the pain, the thing that made people not love me. And maybe I'm not entirely to blame. Clearly, Eric Giante was no saint. But maybe I'm more of a sinner than I ever realized. Maybe I am every bit as fucked up and disgusting as him. I certainly feel like I am.

The rain has picked up again, falling faster now. I close my eyes and lay flat on my back, drawing the blanket over me and trying to force all thoughts of anything other than the sound of comfort out of my mind. I cast out the blood, the pain, the fear, and the anger to empty my mind, refusing to focus on what I've just done or what's been done to me.

When I was a kid, I used to lay in bed during thunderstorms, listening to the howling wind outside and just imagine the rain busting a window and flooding in. It would carry my bed away on a swell of it, taking me away to a world that was brighter, kinder, better. When I became Eric's victim, the dreams had shifted so that when it stormed, it wasn't rain that fell. And it wasn't rain that broke through the window and washed me away… it was blood.

Maybe I've always been sick, and the things that I lived through have just triggered it.

I lay there for hours until the dark recedes, and the sun rises weakly in the sky. I don't sleep, don't close my eyes. I just stare at the white planks of wood over my head and try to make myself number than I already am.

When the clouds part enough for the sun to rise, I still haven't slept, and I still can't get a hold of myself. My brain keeps repeating the same thoughts

in a loop, louder and louder, until they're echoing through my skull with the blood pulsing in my temples.

I sit up so fast my stomach churns at the pain that surges through me, a searing burn as my broken skin stretches too far.

I clutch my abdomen as I cross to the bag I left behind when I tried to go home. I feel like my insides are falling out, so maybe I think doing so will help hold me together a little while longer. I'm errantly grateful that I didn't take any of my belongings when I left. My phone was taken from me when Mack first snatched me out of the back of the car, and I sure as hell am not going back there to look for it. If I had taken all of my luggage with me, I wouldn't have anything now.

It's a small comfort to have my own stuff as I rustle through my bag in search of the bottle of ibuprofen that I always keep with me, my hands running over clothes and socks, the paperback and e-reader I brought.

The package that my hand closes upon first isn't a bottle of ibuprofen. It's a blister pack of medication, and the moment I touch it, cold realization spills through me. I snatch the birth control out of my bag with my heart in my throat and count the pills that are still sealed versus how many are gone.

How long was I gone? How long have I been in Remy's room flitting between consciousness and sleep? When did I take the pill last?

I suck air through my nose in a desperate attempt to calm the rising tidal wave of fear that's nestling in me.

Count the days, Claire.

Two pills short. I missed two days' worth of doses.

Sleeping with Remy without proper protection was stupid. We'd both been caught up in the moment of passion and it certainly hadn't been planned, but it was stupid, nonetheless.

Think, Claire. Google what to do.

Except, you can't, because you still don't have a phone.

"Okay." I don't even realize I say it out loud until I notice how calm my voice actually sounds. "It's fine. You had this happen once before. Take two and get back on track."

I pop the pills out of their pack and swallow them immediately, as if that will make any difference in the grand scheme of things. "You'll be okay, Claire." I say, though I'm not sure if I'm talking to myself or the girl in the mirror. Because either way, we don't seem to be the same person anymore.

I repeat those words as I twist the ibuprofen cap in my hand. I also have melatonin I brought to adjust to the time difference, though I'd forgotten to use it. I dump a little pile of them into the mix and toss back a few of those, too.

It was just one time. You've missed doses before. Everything is going to be okay. You're probably more likely to get a UTI than to get pregnant after one shot.

I stumble back to the bed, suddenly so exhausted that my pounding head, my aching stomach, my tangle of emotions… none of it seems to matter anymore.

No sooner do I fall on the bed than my eyes are as heavy as my limbs. My eyelids are just fluttering closed when I realize that I must have worked myself into an anxiety attack. My heart shudders in my chest, a strange pattering feeling... pathetic. The world blurs together, and I feel like I'm trying to fill my lungs with air I'm sucking through a straw.

But I get what I want, because the pain disappears and then the blissful lack of sensation sweeps over me.

I would swear I hear my heart slow down, down, down…

And then, I'm really numb.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Something about Elaine’s eyes on me the next day when I take a chair at the bar irks me. Maybe it’s the judgement in her eyes or maybe it’s just my own foul mood. Either way, something has shifted out of place in our relationship, and I’m not really sure it will ever go back.

I scrub my hand over my face and help myself to the coffee, trying to ignore her eyes lingering on the back of my neck and the uncomfortable sensation burrowing under my skin. What little coffee is left in the pot is cold.

“Thirty seconds in the microwave should do the trick.” Elaine says, like she just read my mind. “That little start button is a shortcut.”

I hold my tongue the best I can so that I don’t end up snapping at her for treating me like a child and turn my attention to warming up my coffee. When I turn back around, it’s to see her with her arms crossed over her chest, her expression even colder than the coffee was. She doesn’t say anything, her jaw set like she’s working hard to keep it that way.

“What’s for breakfast?” I ask, both to distract her and to irritate her the way she did to me.

“Breakfast?” She snaps. “It’s eleven a.m. It’s practically lunch time.”

“Another late night.” I attempt to dismiss any further conversation that may stem from there, though she doesn’t seem in the mood to entertain me anyway. I didn’t sleep because I couldn’t. How could I when my thoughts won’t leave me alone? Claire is haunting me from down the hall. I watched her last night staring at the ceiling until she jumped out of bed so suddenly

that I thought she was ill. I'm not sure if she was or not, given that I couldn't see her when she moved out of view. I did hear her talking to herself, though I couldn't make out any of it. "I won't object to lunch."

"Well, in that case you'll have to wait."

I open my mouth to retaliate, but then switch tack. "What's the deal, Elaine?" My voice has more venom than usual. "Why have you been so uptight?"

"Uptight?" She laughs harshly, narrowing her cold eyes on me. "I haven't been uptight. I've been *careful*."

"Careful?" I take a sip of the coffee and cringe. Not only is it barely lukewarm, it's bitter and with the texture of coffee grounds that have seeped through the filter. Thirty seconds seems like all it did was warm the mug, but I'm sure Elaine knows that.

"Yes," she nods. "*Careful*. Just because I don't make conversation about your family business, doesn't mean I don't know what it is that you do." Her tone is all accusation.

It's not funny, but I can't exactly take her seriously as she plants her hand on her hip.

"Is that so?" I tease.

Somehow, I didn't think Elaine could possibly know. She's too good, too *pure* to tolerate something like this, so I always assumed she lived in ignorant bliss. But why would she lie now if she doesn't know?

"You trade in people, right? Do you really think I am so oblivious that I didn't know that?" She braces her hands on the counter and leans into me. I get the sudden, distinct impression that I'm being interrogated, and I don't like it. But this is Elaine. I have known her for almost my whole life. She's more a mother to me than my own had been.

I grip the mug so hard in my hands it's a wonder it doesn't shatter and paint my kitchen in tepid coffee. My voice is terse, my jaw tight as I glance around to make sure we are well and truly alone. "I *don't* trade in people, Elaine. I'm a glorified bookkeeper for the ones who do, and I do what I can to make things right."

"I used to believe that." She purses her lips, her stony eyes darting over me. "But now I'm not so sure."

"Elaine." I try not to let the hurt seep into my voice, but it's a pain that cuts deep. "You think I would really do that? You've known me forever."

A shrug of her shoulders proves that it isn't outside the realm of possibility in her opinion. "If I've learned anything in my life, it's that you never really know anyone."

"What's going on with you?" I demand, studying her face like the reason for her suspicion is written there. "You've never doubted me before, but the last few days you've treated me like a criminal."

"Because you are!" She snaps. "You brought that girl here and you put her in the line of fire. I am sorry if the truth hurts, Remy, but she's an innocent and now you've got her tangled up in your mess." She wipes her hands on the towel hanging on the stove and shakes her head. "I want to believe you had nothing to do with it, that it was all Jovich. But I don't know."

"What's going on?" The new addition to our conversation has me tensing, but I play it off when I turn to find my sister. Rhea stands with her hands on her hips, her gaze flickering between me and my suddenly distrustful housekeeper. "It's too early for all this yelling."

"Early?" Elaine laughs, her stony disposition gone as if it had never been there at all. "It's almost lunch time."

"Brunch?" Rhea grins hopefully. "I need to start drinking now if I'm expected to make it through the funeral tonight."

The funeral.

Shit.

I bristle at the realization that everything that has happened lately has pushed all thoughts of my father and the reason that the girls are even here from my mind.

"I think I could whip something up. You just relax, I'll start a fresh pot of coffee."

Elaine is either oblivious or good at ignoring my critical gaze as I all but stare a hole in the back of her neck. Rhea notices, though. She nudges me in the arm with her shoulder, and I turn my angry eyes on her. "What's wrong with *you*?"

"Nothing." I growl, standing up and grabbing my miserable excuse for coffee.

"He woke up on the wrong side of the bed." Elaine supplies, glancing over her shoulder at me.

"Well, at least he woke up. Claire's usually an early bird. Is she seriously still sleeping?" She's trying to sound bright and sunny, her usual self, but I

can hear the undercurrent of nervousness in her words… concern for her friend.

I freeze, turning to face my sister. “Are you asking me or telling me?”

Rhea’s face crumbles into a mask of annoyance. “I’m *asking*, obviously, since you’ve kept her in your room like some sort of puppy you rescued from the pound. Is she still asleep?”

“She went to her room last night.” I say, turning to go again. “I guess I’ll go check on her.”

“I’ll go.” Rhea stands to push past me. “*I’m* her best friend. If she wants to see anyone, it would be me, not you.”

I hold my tongue; Rhea is probably right. After last night, I’m not so sure Claire wants to see me ever again. Our connection had been frantic, punch-drunk, and passionate. It was also fucking perfect. But maybe she doesn’t see it the same way I do. “Fine.” I set my coffee back down on the counter. “I’m going to go check the dock for damages from the storm.”

“Check your brain, too.” Rhea quips. When I turn back to glare at her, she’s laughing. It fades away when she sees the unamused expression on my face. “Damn, Rem. It was a joke.” She glances at Elaine with unveiled annoyance, but I don’t stick around to hear the rest of their conversation. I’m nearly at the front door when she calls after me, “I think you need to get laid!”

I ignore her and let the door slam shut behind me, letting my house swallow them all.

Rhea is wrong. I don’t need to get laid.

I just need to have a little fun.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I’m not dreaming. I’m not sure I’m even sleeping. But the knock on the door doesn’t sound real… it’s distant, foggy, like it came from across space and time to reach me. I try to peel my eyes open, but the darkness remains.

The only way to ease my migraine is to shut the curtains and lay in the dark and quiet. I forgot I shut the blackout drapes before crawling back to the bed and collapsing on top of it. “Claire?” Rhea’s voice drags me back to reality a little, though it’s still distorted somehow.

I sigh.

“Come in.”

Rhea wastes no time, popping the door open and taking a tentative step inside. “Claire?” Her voice comes again, but this time it’s confused, uncertain. The light from the hall slips in just enough for me to see her standing with a hand on the doorframe, like if she lets go and moves too far into the room, the darkness will swallow her.

Maybe it would.

“Hey.” It takes a lot of effort, but I pull myself up into sitting and pat the bed so that she knows she’s welcome to join me. I haven’t seen her since everything with Jovich, and already that feels so long ago. In fact, the last time I saw Rhea, she’d been chasing a mystery woman down the hall. It feels like worlds have been born and collapsed into stardust in the space between then and now.

“Why are you…” Rhea hesitates. She knows how I feel about the dark... that I’m significantly more terrified than a twenty-year-old should

reasonably be of it.

I decide to spare her from agonizing over her word choice. “I have a migraine. The light makes it worse.”

“Oh.” She’s close enough now that I can see her frown, concern written in the shape of her face. “Do you need anything for it? Ambien or Advil, or… *something*?”

Ambien.

I think of the plane ride to Costa Rica, the fuzzy feeling that had tugged at my edges, the drowsy warmth, the depth of sleep I’d gotten.

I bite my lip, uncertain that medicating is a good idea right now. But it promises relief, no matter how short-lived it will be, and after hours of self-imposed mental torture, relief in any form sounds amazing. “Yes, actually. I couldn’t sleep last night.”

“I’ll send Elaine up with something.” Rhea sighs, her hand closing over mine. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Okay is relative.

I’m broken.

I’m falling apart.

I’m sleeping with her brother.

And I’m a murderer.

I’m not sure any of that is what I would call ‘okay’, but none of it is Rhea’s fault, which is why when the sob breaks through her chest, I ignore the screaming pain in my stomach and pull her into the tightest hug I can manage.

“I’m so sorry, Claire!” Her words are muffled against my shoulder. I can feel the hot tears spilling down her cheeks, falling on my neck and wetting my hair as she cries without abandon.

“It’s not your fault!” I tell her, because it’s the truth. “You couldn’t have known that Jovich was unhinged like that.”

The lie feels stale on my tongue. I don’t expect her to know everything about everyone, but it isn’t as if Jovich was simply acting on some crazy distrust of me. He was doing what he thought would protect her—giving me up in her place. I don’t forgive him for it, but I guess I understand it.

“I never should have abandoned you!” She holds me tighter as she shakes, her words quivering along with her. “I’m sorry! God, Claire, I’m so sorry! It was so selfish of me!”

“Rhea,” I pull away to try and get a clear breath, wiping some of her tears off my skin with the back of my sleeve. “It wasn’t selfish, and you didn’t abandon me. We’re on vacation, and you deserve to have fun without me at your side. I had a nice time with Remy.”

It isn’t the whole truth, but it also has the benefit of not being a lie. I did enjoy being out on the ocean with Remy, and I absolutely had a good time kissing him. We had an honest conversation, and Remy gave me a lot to think about, but it had been good up until we made it back to his room. It was good until Jovich told Remy everything I’ve tried to bury. I wondered then if he just had an uncanny ability to sense when we were getting hot and heavy, but now I’m sure he had very much orchestrated the whole thing to make Remy believe the worst about me, to drive a wedge that would make getting me out of the picture easier.

I still don’t understand why Jovich hated me so boldly, why he would choose to subject me to a life of torture just because he didn’t like me. But it doesn’t matter why. Jovich is dead, along with Mack and Slick. Knowing his motivation won’t take the pain away, won’t change the fact that he took something invaluable from me in the moment he sold me to a life of cruelty. The happiness I fought so hard to have is gone and the only shred of comfort I have is in knowing that it happened to me and not Rhea. At least *I’m* already broken, already used to the pain and shame and the need to escape.

Remy had said their father tried to leverage Rhea to satisfy his debts. I didn’t know the man, but I have no reason not to trust Remy on that front, which means that it could have just as easily been her. The thought of losing her and being forced to move on with my life is more terrifying than whatever fate may have awaited me if Remy hadn’t shown up.

Rhea pulls away and manages a smile that’s obviously for my benefit. “You just stay up here and get some sleep. I’ll check on you after the funeral and then we can talk about our flight home.”

The funeral.

I forgot all about it.

“Oh my god!” I let my pounding head fall into my hands, pressing the tips of my fingers against my forehead. The pressure and the coolness offer me a little reprieve from the violent pulsing in my temples. I toss the blanket aside and make to stand, but Rhea catches my arm and shakes her head. “I just need a shower before we go. What time is it?”

“You’re not going anywhere.” Rhea’s eyes rove over me and then she points at the pillow. “Lay back down.”

“I came here for the funeral.” I argue weakly. “I’m not letting you go alone.”

“I won’t be alone.” Her voice is soothing as she puts a gentle hand on my shoulder and nudges me just hard enough for my exhausted body to comply. I lay back, rolling to my side to see her better. “I’ve got Remy. You don’t need to worry about me, Claire. Just worry about yourself right now.”

I’m way ahead of her on that one, but I decide not to mention it. I nod a little and try not to get too emotional. I think my throat is threatening to close… it’s thick with tears I try not to shed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me.” Rhea sighs. “*I’m* the one who should be sorry.”

“No.” I press my hand more firmly over the back of my eyes, fighting the wave of nausea rising up in me. “I’ll be fine after I get some sleep.”

I don’t believe it myself. The only way sleep will help is if it takes away the pain and keeps it away, too. “I’ll go ask Elaine for the sleeping pill.” I feel her move off the bed, the mattress shifting as she stands. I also hear her footsteps like thunderclaps as she walks to the door, where she hesitates a moment before speaking. “Claire?”

“Rhea?” I manage, though her name is frail on my tongue. I’m just so tired.

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“Mmm.” It’s all I can manage. If I open my mouth, there is an acute possibility that I will throw up, and I definitely don’t want to do that… at least, not in front of Rhea.

Fortunately, she must be satisfied with my response. She shuts the door, the soft sound of the latch echoing in my skull like my screams in the empty warehouse.

I sit up so fast that the dark room blurs before me as I rush to the bathroom.

And I lift the lid just in time to throw up.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

“I knew you’d come for me eventually, Boudreaux.” Wes grins. I removed the rag from his mouth not even thirty seconds ago, and already he’s spouting off. Part of me wants to just shove it back in so far he chokes on it and walk away.

But I’ve been putting this conversation off long enough. Dimitri agreed to take care of my supposed half-brother while I’m busy worrying about Claire. He’s set up in the guest house to make sure Wes doesn’t get an opportunity to escape, taking him to the bathroom like a dog a couple times a day. It’s better than he deserves, but this is my guest house. I don’t need him stinking it up any more than he already has.

“If you’re going to speak, you’d better be saying something important.”

I pull the chair out from under the nearby desk and swing it around in front of me. Wes arches an eyebrow as he watches me sit backwards on it, leaning my arms against the top of the backrest. He grins, far too unconcerned given the situation he’s in.

Arrogant little fucker.

“Okay, Boudreaux. What do you want to know? You want to hear about how my father fucked your mother before you were even a thought in her empty little head? Or do you want to talk about your dead daddy some more?”

I flex my fist, trying to let go of some of the tension that has built in me. Over the course of the last few days, it’s only seemed to escalate. I need to

get out of the house, to get answers, to face Davos myself. I can’t do any of that yet… not while I still have to worry over the girls.

“Neither, huh?” Wes tips his head, realizing that I’m not taking his bait. “How’s Claire?”

Wes is good. He knows what he’s doing, choosing his words to get under my skin, seeing my weaknesses and figuring out how to exploit them. I suppose he’s had to be good, growing up with a man like Alexandre Davos as his father. I thought I’d had it bad growing up with Jonathan Boudreaux, but my father was just a pawn in Davos’ game, which means that Wes probably had things just as bad as I did. His father is the gamemaster, and everyone else in his life is his to play with. But not me. Not anymore.

“Claire is great.” I lie. I don't even know why I say those words, other than that I can't stand the thought of him knowing just how badly he’s broken her. I know how lucky she is that I found her in time, and I don’t doubt that she knows as well, but that doesn't mean that what she went through before I stepped in is somehow lessened by how much worse it could have been. The depravity, the depth of darkness that she narrowly escaped, is lost even upon her. I’ll spend every minute that I can trying to make sure that she never has to learn the extent of evil she’d nearly been consumed by.

Still, Wes smirks, calling me on my bullshit without so much as a single word. “Fabulous.” He says. “Maybe we can kiss and make up. You know, prior to her getting herself involved in your mess, I had every intention of spreading that little cunt myself. Maybe we can share?”

Wes finds his mark as rage sears in the pit of my stomach, smoke curling in my soul.

He wants a reaction? I’ll give him one.

I stand calmly, the fury building in me just under the surface. I appear calm enough that Wes decides to keep going. “I like when they scream, you know? If it’s pain or pleasure, doesn’t matter.” He shrugs. “Think she’ll scream if I take her ass while you watch?”

The knife is under his throat before he even has the chance to see it. That smirk falters for one glorious moment as his eyes drift down to take in the blade. “Come on brother,” he teases, his mouth snapping over the word. “Didn’t our whore mother teach you to share?”

“My mother taught me many things.” I assure him. “We had housekeepers and cooks and drivers, but it was always important to her that

we knew how to take care of ourselves, just in case. I always hated when she would teach me something about cooking. It was just so... mundane."

I can see the question in his eyes, wondering where I'm going with this. I pull the blade away from his throat and appraise him a moment before lunging at him, the tip of the knife now sitting firmly in the middle of his pants. If he moves right now, he runs the risk of my hand slipping. "One of the most… *illuminating* lessons was when she taught me how to filet a fish. You start with a single slice, right down the center." I draw the blade over the crotch of his pants, just firmly enough to leave a rip in the wake of it, the fabric giving easily under my blade. I think of how he held a camera in Claire's face while another man dragged a knife down her chest much the same way and press harder, until I can just barely feel something under the tip of the blade.

I feel rather than see him shudder as realization settles in, his eyes wide.

There's so much more to it, so many more threats that I could make, but that look tells me there is no need to go any further. Wes doesn't know yet whether I'm prone to violence, whether I'll follow through on such a gruesome threat. And he doesn't need to know yet, because the look of terror in his eyes tells me I've earned his compliance.

"Oh, brother." I laugh, throwing his words back in his face. "What's the matter? You can dish it to innocent women, but you can't take it?"

"Why are you so interested in my cock?" He manages, trying to deflect.

His family may suck, and his childhood may have been unhappy, but growing up with a father as powerful as Alexandre Davos had surely spoiled him into becoming a bully. I'm sure it's easy to make threats when you have a pack of lions at your back, but Wes needs to understand that he doesn't have them anymore. He only has me.

Or rather, I have him. And I need everyone to know it.

"Don't worry, Wes." I chuckle, straightening and stashing the blade. I have no interest in cutting off another man's dick. And while I'm not necessarily aroused by the idea of watching Claire do it, I would.

I laugh when his chest heaves with relief. My back is already toward him when I speak again. "You get to keep your favorite toy for another day."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I dragged myself back to the bed using what little energy I did have and crawled under the covers. I'm just about asleep, floating on the fringe of consciousness, when there's a light knock on the door. I don't have the energy to tell them to come in or to go away, but thankfully it doesn't matter because the door opens regardless. There's a moment of quiet, and then Elaine comes around to the center of the room, holding a small tray in her hands. "Rhea said you needed something to help you sleep." Her voice is gentle, soothing.

When I first met her, Elaine looked at me like I made her want to crawl out of her skin. But then she shifted to acting like I was a part of the family, like we've known one another for all my life. It's weird, and while it may have sent alarm bells going off if I had the chance to really think about it, I can't focus on it. I'm not sure I can trust her. My instincts are clearly terrible, seeing as how I allowed myself to get into the car with Jovich despite my better interest.

But if Elaine is going to kill me, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. Anything would be preferable to the tortured coldness I'm stuck in, the damp and dirty feeling of what I've done, the guilt like a collar notched too tight around my neck.

My head spins and every time I close my eyes, I can feel the hands on me… so many hands, dark and decaying demon hands, tearing at my skin and trying to drag me to Hell. If Elaine is going to kill me, it could be

chocked up to a mercy killing. At least I won’t be tortured by the prospect of hope anymore.

Elaine moves closer, and I, unable to focus my gaze on her, find myself staring at a spot on her skirt. She drops to her knees at the side of the bed and then her hands are under me, guiding me into a sitting position so that she can place the pill she brought me on my tongue. It starts to dissolve immediately, leaving a bitter taste there before she lifts the water bottle to my lips and tilts it for me.

Swallowing takes too much effort, but I manage to get the water down. Elaine tips the bottle toward me as if offering more, but that was all I can manage. I shake my head just a little, almost prepared to fall back on the pillows again when she lifts a hand to my forehead. Her skin is cool, a comforting relief against the burning of my flesh. My face is hot, but at the same time, I’m so cold that I’m shivering, my entire body trembling so hard that it all aches. I didn’t even notice until her gentle touch on my skin makes me realize as much.

“You’re burning up.” Elaine says, her pale lips drawing into a frown. Concern etches her pretty face as she appraises me. “Lie back.”

I don't need to be told twice. The suggestion is welcome, and I gladly fall back against the mattress, letting my eyes flutter closed. She hovers above me for a moment, moving just a little, and I’m not sure what she’s doing until I feel the comforter being tucked around me. I can feel the weight of it, but not the warmth. “I am so sorry Claire.” She says it gently, but sincerely. “You’re safe now.”

Safe?

I’m not sure I even know the meaning of the word anymore. I’m not sure I ever will again. “Let me check your bandage.” She says, peeling back the hem of my shirt. Her fingers brush against the gauze, sending a wave of discomfort through me, and then I feel the gentle pull as she lifts it gingerly.

A strange sound rolls off of her tongue, and then she replaces it, drops the blanket back in place and pats my arm gently. “You get some sleep Claire. It's the best thing you can do right now.”

I’m not sure I even have a choice; It isn't like I can do anything else. I’m vaguely aware of her walking to the door, and then I let my eyelids close, and the current of sleep takes me.

But it’s not a peaceful sleep. Those same charred hands still claw at me, only this time I don't startle myself awake. Maybe it really is death. I

deserve nothing less after what I've done. And if it is hell, at least it isn't a stagnant nightmare, the repeated loop of being pulled into the abyss.

It goes on for what feels like an eternity, but then all at once that stops and I'm lying still on a bed staring at the ceiling. It's quiet... until it isn't. It's quiet until the screams encompass me, agonizing sounds that come from somewhere I can't see, from people I don't know. And yet, those screams set a crack in my stomach that shatters, sending shards of glass through me and opening up a chasm so deep I fear it will swallow the world.

Instead, it only swallows me, taking me away to another place… a memory.

The whisper in my ear holds me hostage just as much as the fingers on my mouth. *"Shh."*

It's the sound you make to soothe fears, to calm an infant's wail, to allay someone's frustration. But it is none of that which leads him to make me quiet. It's a threat of compliance, a warning not to fight. I've never been much of a fighter… not then, not now. So, I allow myself to be hushed and empty my mind, trying not to let myself drown in the memory… or the recurrence of my earliest nightmare.

But it doesn't matter—whether this is life or death, whether this is a memory or a happening. None of it matters anymore, because finally obsoletion takes hold.

***

I've been scared of the dark for as long as I can remember. Even before Eric Giante started to sneak into my bed, I always felt that bad things happened when the lights went out. In the cover of quiet and night, monsters can find their prey. And even if the monsters were kept at bay, I had the nightmares to contend with.

The nightmares haunted me long before I decided to stain my soul, before I understood the cruelty mankind was capable of. My first memory is a nightmare… being stuffed into a closet, watching through the slats as figures move around in the relative dark of a bedroom. I don't know who the figures are, or who the screams belong to, but I guess maybe they're mine, since I usually wake up screaming. The first time it happened, I lived with the Oterra's, who weren't bad, but were woefully unprepared to deal with a child like me. Mrs. Oterra held me for a while, trying to rock me

back to sleep even though I had to have been about five years old. Mr. Oterra made me a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of chocolate milk, like that would fix whatever was wrong with me. I don't think I was ever able to tell them what the nightmare was about. They did their best to soothe me, bought me a cool ballerina nightlight and a new stuffed animal to take to bed to ‘protect me’. But none of that kept the nightmares from coming back, night after night. None of that kept me from waking up, screaming, gasping for air, my pillow wet with tears.

I still know, all these years later, that is the reason that they never adopted me. After three years of sleepless nights for a child who wasn’t their own, they’d had enough, and so it was on to the next family.

Those nightmares stopped for a while, but they came back with a vengeance, and they stuck around for the better part of my teenage years. When I met Rhea and convinced myself that I had healed from my past, they stopped for the most part. Every so often, a bad dream would break through, but overall, I had put them behind me.

But the things that swirl through my head as I lay on the bathroom floor, pressing my face against the tile to try and cool off, are a fusion of every unpleasant thought I've ever had.

This must be hell. I’m a murderer, and now my soul is damned. I’ll live forever in a loop of despair, fear, desperation, pain… so much pain.

The devil knows my name. He has seen what I've done, and now I am his prisoner. I have no one to blame but myself. I hear him calling to me from the darkest corners of wherever I am, and I can't run from him. I'm too weak to sit up, let alone stand. There's nowhere to hide.

So, I simply lay there, waiting for him to come.

His footsteps get closer, but I never see him. Instead, I feel his presence and the weight of the darkness threatening to pull me under, further into the depths of my purgatory. I’m so emotionally and physically worn out that I don't have anything left in me besides the pain. As everything else fades, the agony only grows, multiplying until I only feel relief when he finally appears.

His face is cast in shadows… or maybe he is made of shadows. I try to get a look at him, but he is darkness incarnate. As he lifts me into his arms, my head falls to the side, and I lose track of which way is up and which is down.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

“Wes?” Rhea’s confusion clouds the chapel the minute she walks in and looks up to see our guest sandwiched on a hard wooden bench between Dimitri and Michael. The bruise under his eye is already yellowing and the fucker’s wearing one of my suits. I’d have had him come in the blood-stained clothes he was wearing when I took him hostage, if only to prove a point, but I can’t have Rhea asking questions any more than she already will. There’s no sense in stoking a fire that’s dangerously close to burning out of control.

“You’ll have to tell her eventually.” Wes had teased me, delighting in the fact that he could spill the whole unfortunate truth to Rhea with just a few words. Of course, I’d warned him that was ill-advised, but there’s no telling what he will say or do. That’s why Dimitri and Michael aren’t going to let him out of arm’s reach.

Wes turns, his eyes brightening as they lock on my sister. He rises to greet her, and Michael stands with him, slipping a hand in his jacket pocket where it surely wraps over the gun there. Michael has no intention of shooting him in a church full of our distant family, friends, and business partners, but he is good at his job. I have no doubt that if Wes puts so much as a toe out of line, he’ll be dealt with discreetly and efficiently.

“Rhea!” He braces his hands on her shoulders and fixes her with a quick once-over that’s a bit too appreciative given that we all share a mother. “You look incredible.”

Despite her confusion, Rhea's light is rarely dampened. She smiles brightly and sweeps him into a hug, as if they're old friends. Over her shoulder, Wes' gaze catches mine, his eyes glittering at his own private joke —our little secret. "Where's Claire?" His smirk deepens, stretching his cut lip so that a trickle of blood shows as he says her name, anticipating a response from me.

I give him nothing, so he pulls away to look at Rhea again. "Claire isn't feeling well." She explains, shaking her head. "How… why are you here?"

"Me?" Wes laughs. "Oh, I was sent on behalf of my father. They're business partners. Old friends, really."

"Oh." That surprises her. "Who's your father?"

Michael shifts, a gentle reminder to Wes that we are still in control. "Alexandre Davos."

Realization dawns on Rhea's face, her lips forming into an 'O'. "You're Ryan's cousin?"

"Didn't he mention it?" Wes grins, his hands wrapping around her forearms so that he can command her attention. "Tristan wasn't able to make it on such short notice, but he sends his regards, of course."

Rhea nods, suddenly seeming to remember where we are. She looks up at the altar with a sigh, her eyes lingering on the shiny coffin. "You don't have to go up there." I tell her, just in case she's thinking of sitting down instead of climbing the three stairs in her heels.

"Of course, I'm going up there." She chides. And then she sighs, her eyes turning on me. "Will you come with me, Rem?"

No part of me has any desire to see that man's face ever again, but I can't just abandon my sister to face her grief alone. I nod and she nods back like she's trying to prepare herself.

Wes is the least of my problems as I follow Rhea up the steps, fighting the urge to turn back.

It's part of the ruse, I tell myself. *This is a business move.*

A small gasp escapes her as Rhea draws up to the side of the coffin, placing a hand on the polished walnut. She looks like she's about to faint, her face pale and her eyes distant. I give her shoulder a gentle squeeze, steadying her, calming her, maybe. I don't know what I'm supposed to do, just what I'm *not* supposed to do.

We hadn't been allowed this process with our mother when she passed. *"Her wishes were clear,"* My father had said. *"She wanted to be*

cremated.”

Whether or not that was true, I’m still not sure. But I am sure that we’d been told she was gone just moments before men showed up at the door and whisked her away beneath a white sheet. We didn’t see her body, we didn’t get her ashes, and there was no funeral. If I had my way, my father wouldn’t have one either, but I can’t deny that right to my sister.

When I gather the courage to look down at his cold face, it feels like someone has sucked all the oxygen out of the room. Jonathan Boudreaux is, in death, nowhere near as fearsome as I’d found him to be my whole life.

He *is*, however, still cold, empty, and soulless.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I’m burning. From guilt, from fever, from the punishment of whatever ring of Hell I’ve been taken to. Fire eats at my skin, blisters my organs, turns my soul black with its smoke.

And then the barest relief washes over me, like I’ve been thrown in the ocean.

My eyes fly open, and I try to sit up, drawing a deep breath of air that lets water into my lungs. I cough, my body crumpling in half, until I think I’ll hack up a lung. A hand on my back smacks against my skin, helping clear the water I sucked in, and once I’m finally able to breathe air, I realize I’m looking into Elaine’s soft brown eyes. “You’re okay.” She promises. I think she’s promised that a couple of times, actually, but this is the first time it has really registered.

I look around me at the bathroom, my clothes laying in a pile on the ground like they’ve been thrown there in a hurry. My eyes flit down to my body, submerged in a tub of ice-cold water with nothing but a soaking wet towel draped over me. “You undressed me?” I say, too weak for the accusation to come out like the demand for answers I want.

Even to me, it’s weak and feckless. My teeth chatter together violently. Where a moment ago I’d been burning, now I’m surely freezing to death. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen.” She laughs, but it’s tense. “You were burning up. If a fever gets too high for too long, it can cause brain damage. I don’t know how long you were out before I found you.”

I close my eyes, letting her words settle over me like another layer of ice, though she spoke warmly, like she was concerned. “What the hell is wrong with me?” I mutter, more to myself than to her. I don’t expect an answer at all, honestly.

“I think you must have an infection,” she says quietly. “But we’ll find out for sure in just a bit. The doctor is on her way here now. She should be here any minute.”

“Doctor?” I try to stand, but my legs are insubstantial, rendering me unable to move. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“Of course, you do.” She pushes me back with a gentle hand, and I slip against the porcelain, coming to rest up o my neck in the water. “If only we’d taken you to the hospital when you first came back, this wouldn’t have happened.” She shakes her head and mutters something, but I don’t bother trying to decipher what it is.

I close my eyes, resolving that I have no energy to fight her, and when I open them again, it’s like time has passed. I don’t know if it was seconds or minutes, but now there is another middle-aged woman leaning over me. The scent of jasmine threatens to drown me, making my head spin. I focus on the pin on her coat, a triangle surrounded by a circle with three gemstones set in it. She and Elaine talk while I focus on not slipping under the water, and every once in a while, her cool hands run over my skin in innocent gestures, offering me some small comfort.

“Your fever is coming down well, Claire.” The doctor smiles. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

I rise with their help, clutching the sopping wet towel against me to preserve whatever dignity I still have, which is about none, and lean against Elaine as I step one foot out of the tub, and then the other. “I’ll wipe up the floor later.” She mutters, her eyes flitting to the water dripping on the wood.

“Close your eyes.” I tell them as we approach the bed. The doctor smiles like she’s trying to hide a laugh, and Elaine shakes her head, but they both oblige long enough for me to drop the towel and slip into a dry robe.

“Okay,” I tell them when I’m safely in the bed. “You can open your eyes.”

Elaine scoops up the towel and takes it to the bathroom. The doctor focuses on me, smiling softly. Suddenly I feel like a child; It should feel patronizing, but it’s oddly comforting. “I heard you have a pretty nasty cut. Can I take a look?”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I abandoned the illusion of being a good person a long time ago when I chose to be complicit in my family's dark holdings rather than take the chance that my loved ones would be hurt. I chose safety over the greater good, and while I work to undo the damage that I did by keeping their secrets, I also know that doesn't make me a good guy. At best, some might call me morally ambiguous. If there's anything after this life, it will be Hell for me, and I've made my peace with that.

But as I sit at my father's funeral, drowning out the incessant monologuing about what a great and powerful man he was, I realize I may be more of a dick than I thought. The clock drags by as each person who claims to have had some sort of relationship with the horrible old man stands up and delivers remarks colored to make it seem like the world is a little bit darker because of his death.

I know the truth, though, which is that the world is a little safer now. At least, the people I love are a little safer without my father lording over me, using their well-being to pull my strings.

When it all finally ends and we have to line up to receive condolences, I pray—for the first time since I was a child—for an end to come. I could care less if the church bursts into flames at this point if it will get everyone out of here.

But the building doesn't combust, so I stand next to Rhea and shake hands with the mile of people who come to us with their solemn faces and tell me they're sorry for my loss. My sister gives hugs to every one of them,

even though she can't possibly know all of these people, and accepts their apologies as if that will really make her feel any better. She doesn't know that our father's death is no loss. In fact, it guarantees her safety a little while longer.

I've learned to get through the unpleasant stuff by disconnecting. Sometimes it's as simple as flipping a switch, pulling a cord from the wall. It's how I got through his verbal abuse as a child and it's how I got through each one of those awful auctions I had to watch in an attempt to outbid other men for the freedom of strangers. It's how I can pull a trigger or plunge a knife into someone, ending one life to preserve another. I've gotten so good at it that nobody usually notices that I've stepped out of my own consciousness.

But once the room has emptied and Rhea turns to me, I realize she caught me. Her eyes are rimmed in red, and I can tell she's been crying. She looks exhausted, worn out. It feels like years have passed since we walked into this church. "They kicked everybody out so that we can say our goodbyes," she says, nodding at the coffin perched on the altar. "I think I can go up alone this time."

She doesn't sound terribly confident in the words that she speaks, but she's offering me an escape, and I'm not too proud to take it. "Are you sure?" I ask, searching her face for any indication that she's just trying to put on a brave front, that she needs me to accompany her.

"Yes," she nods. "I want a minute alone, if it's okay with you."

"Of course." I answer her quickly, but she doesn't seem to notice. A small smile forms on her lips. "I've already had my chance to say goodbye, so take all the time you need. I'm going to step out for a minute."

"Thank you, Rem." Rhea says, pulling me into a hug. "For everything."

I'm not sure what she means by that, but I'm not in the position to question it. I just hug her back and try not to imagine how close I was to standing here with *her* in the coffin instead. We may not have been terribly close by other people's standards, but my sister is the closest person to me. She's been the one constant my whole life, and even when we hate each other, our love is stronger. I abandoned her and Monica to keep them safe, but even if it was for her own safety, I could never cut my sister off completely.

I press a kiss to the top of her head and turn away before she can see the single tear I have to blink away. Understanding that I'm about to leave her

alone, she catches my hand, holding onto it for a moment longer before letting go to have her final moments with the man she called her father.

I leave her standing in the center of the church, facing off with an expensive coffin.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

“It’s very clearly infected.” The doctor mumbles. Even through her thick accent, the irritation is obvious. “I don’t know what this is all about, but she should have been taken to the hospital and put on antibiotics.”

“I know.” Elaine nods her agreement. “But we can’t have people asking questions, Carmen. You know that.”

“Then you should have called *me* instead of trying to handle it yourself.” The doctor—Carmen— snaps.

I can hear them, though it sounds like I’m listening to their conversation from the bottom of the ocean, and I can see the outline of them standing together by the door, but everything is too fuzzy to get a good sense of what’s going on. “Please,” Elaine says, desperation streaking her voice. “Help her.”

“What do you think I’m here for, Elaine? Of course, I’m going to help her. But the antibiotics may not be enough. You really shouldn’t have waited.”

“I don’t care what you have to do.” Elaine assures her. “Save that girl’s life or we are going to have some really big problems. I promise you that.”

A sigh escapes one of them, and a moment later I see the shape of the doctor as she comes closer to me. “I’m going to start an IV and some antibiotics to help your body heal, okay?” She offers me a smile that I think is meant to be calming, but it doesn’t matter. I’m calm. I’m barely lucid. She could tell me she’s going to chop off my hand and I’d close my eyes

and wait for it to be over if I thought it would make this torture stop. “I’m also going to take some blood samples. I’ll be quick, promise.”

I barely feel the needle piercing my flesh. It’s the least offensive pain I’ve experienced in the last week, so I close my eyes and drift on the edge of sleep until the doctor’s words call me back from the fringe.

“I’m going to stay a little while, Miss Monroe, if that’s alright with you.”

I don’t honestly care what happens—to me, to the doctor. Nothing matters anymore.

I’m back on the wings of sleep, flying away into another world, before I can even open my mouth to answer her.

**

When I wake next, the doctor is standing near the window with her back to me, which is convenient because I don’t have to worry about vomiting on her when I roll over and throw up on the floor. I don’t remember the last time I’ve eaten anything with substance, and the bile on the floor makes that clear.

As I sit up, I feel the pull of the needle in my skin, and without thinking about why it’s there, make to rip it out. A hand on mine stops me; I look up to see the woman I recognize as a doctor. But something about her looks different now. I blink as I try to figure out what it is, and then realization hits. It isn’t the doctor that’s different—it’s the room.

Where the hell am I?

Panic starts to flare in my chest, but it doesn’t make it far, because the woman grabs my cheeks between her hands and angles my face so that I can get a good look at her. “You’re okay, Claire.”

Something about the way she speaks makes me want to believe her, but she’s a complete stranger. On top of that, I’m no longer in my room, so she hasn’t given me a whole lot of reasons to trust her.

Seeming to sense my hesitation, the doctor answers the questions I didn’t ask out loud. “You’re in the hospital.” She says. “You’re completely safe here. Your friends are right outside that door. Just sit back, okay?”

My eyes flicker around the room before landing on the door. The room doesn’t look like any hospital I’ve ever seen—it’s too cheery. It looks more like a hotel, with a little kitchen set up in one corner and a comfortable-looking sofa pushed against the opposite wall. The giveaway to her truth is that everything is eerily sterile.

I ease back against the bed and meet the woman's gaze to demand more answers. But my voice comes out strangled, and I realized my throat is raw, so I gratefully accept the water she hands me and take a few long sips through the straw.

"You were severely dehydrated. I was trying to set up an IV, but I couldn't even find a good vein—that's never been my specialty, so I called in the big guns, and we brought you here. You're in a private room reserved for hospital donors and receiving the best care. You're already leaps and bounds better than you were when we brought you in. How do you feel?"

I have more questions, but I stop to consider hers first. I feel… better. I'm not burning or freezing anymore, my double vision has cleared, and the world seems balanced again. My head is clear enough to recognize that despite her thick accent, she speaks in perfect English. "I'm okay." I say, and this time my voice doesn't crack when I speak.

Mentally, I'm still certain I'm fucked, but physically, I feel a world away from where I've been before.

"Okay," the doctor nods. "I'm glad to hear that. Now I have some questions for you, and I need you to be completely honest with me."

Something about the way she says that sends a chill over me; suddenly I feel like I'm being interrogated. Does she know what I've done? Am I going to be thrown in a Costa Rican prison? The nausea in my stomach roils, but I fight it back by taking another sip of water and nodding my consent for her to continue.

"Are you in danger?"

I blink, unsure of how to answer that. I'm in danger of being found a murderer, of having my whole life wrenched away from me, of being locked away and never seeing the light of day again. I'm also in danger of losing my grip on sanity, of being dragged to hell, of being captured again when somebody comes calling to follow up on their purchase of me.

"No." I swallow. With Rhea, I'm safe. I've never had a single doubt about that. And even after what Remy and I did, after he'd pulled a gun on me on the boat and pinned me by the neck against his wall, I knew that I was safe with him. He proved as much when he found me in that filthy warehouse and single-handedly took them all down.

"Okay," she nods, tucking a loose strand of her dark hair behind her ear. She doesn't sound entirely convinced, but she lets it go, moving onto the

next question. “Your injuries—were they caused by anybody in the Boudreaux home?”

“No!” I answer that one quickly, because it’s easy to see where she’s going with this. I don’t want to give her any reason to think that the only people who are keeping me safe are causing me harm. “Rhea is like my sister, and Remy has been… he’s making sure I’m taken care of.”

“And in the time that you’ve been with them, you haven’t been forced to do anything you don’t want to?”

“I…” I’m not sure how much she knows about what happened. Hopefully none of it. I’m not going to tell her I was kidnapped and sold, which I most certainly hadn’t volunteered for. “Not at their hands, no.”

“Good.” The doctor looks reasonably more relaxed by that admission. “One last question, and then you can tell me how you’d like to proceed. Okay?”

I press my lips together, noticing how dry they feel, and nod again.

“Other than the sleeping pills, have you taken anything that may alter your consciousness? Alcohol, illicit drugs, stuff like that.”

“Not recently.” I shake my head. “We went to the club—I don’t know when that was, but that’s the last time I drank. As far as drugs, just the stuff that Rhea or Elaine gave me.”

“Hmm,” she mulls over my response a minute, trying to figure out what her next words are, before she speaks again. “Well, your blood work came back.” She holds up a tablet, which I presume holds the results of whatever tests she had run.

“Is everything… okay?”

It’s been a while since I’ve had any sort of testing done—four years, almost to the day, since I tried to take my life and was admitted to the hospital for a litany of tests and questions that my social worker had helped me field. I did an STD test not long after I began at Darrington, but otherwise I haven’t seen a doctor in years. I also threw myself at Remy the other day without stopping to consider any sort of protection, although I trust him not to put me at risk considering what we’ve been through together.

Panic starts a drumbeat in my chest and my overactive imagination roars to life as I consider the possibilities of what she’s about to tell me—that I’m sick, that I’ve been exposed to something like herpes, that I have blood poisoning from that dirty blade Slick had dragged over my skin, even the

possibility of pregnancy, though I’m not sure testing can tell so early considering I wasn’t with Remy until last night.

None of those possibilities prepare me for reality when the doctor looks levelly at me.

“You’ve been poisoned.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Rhea’s face is dry by the time she steps out onto the church’s stone stairs with me a few moments later. She looks sad, but also somehow relieved, as if she’s just grateful to have made it through the last few hours. I certainly understand that.

Pretending to care about a man who didn’t give a damn about a single person beyond himself is as mentally taxing as it is physically, and I’m ready to get out of the public eye. Some of the crowd has dissipated by the time I step outside, and even more have left by the time Rhea joins me, but it doesn’t take long for the procession to begin again as people come to tell us what a beautiful service we pulled together or to offer their condolences.

“I’m going to punch the next person who tells us that the service was lovely,” I grumble loudly enough for Rhea to hear, prompting a cross between a giggle and a snort to escape her.

I’m already feeling murderous by the time Wes turns up with Dimitri and Michael close behind. I consider pulling Rhea after me back into the church, but my desire to go back in there is even less than my desire to deal with our annoying-ass illegitimate brother.

I choose wrong, and Wes makes that clear when he pulls Rhea into a hug and catches my eye over her shoulder, the ever-present smirk on his lips deepening as I glare at him. He wipes it clean quickly when Rhea pulls away and takes a step back to fix him with a small smile. “The service was lovely.” He tells her.

Fuck. If I had any doubts about him being related to us, that clears them up. He knows how to piss me off like it's his job— the way only family can do.

Rhea chuckles, glancing at me from the corner of her eye, and smooths her hair. "I'll pass the message along to the one who organized it. I like event planning, but this," she gestures to the doors behind us, boxed in by two gigantic floral arrangements. "This isn't my cup of tea."

"Of course not." Wes nods aggressively. "I mean, who wants to plan funerals for a living? It's one of the darkest professions I can think of."

I don't bother hiding the laugh that his words draw out of me. "I can think of worse." I cross my arms, glancing at Dimitri knowingly. "It's getting late. We should really get back to the house before Elaine gets upset that we're late for dinner."

"Remy," Rhea scolds me. "I think Elaine will understand, today of all days, if we don't make it in time for dinner. I am, however, pretty drained, so we should be going soon."

"You're right," I concede, "Elaine understands our obligations, but we'd best get going anyway." I fix her with a pointed look that she accepts with no further objections… until she turns to Wes.

"You should come for dinner. It would be rude of us to send you all the way back to the states without having you as our guest."

"I'd love to!" Wes' response comes so quickly, it's like he planned for Rhea to invite him. He probably did.

"That's a nice thought, but I'm sure Wes has a flight to catch." I deadpan. "Isn't that right, Wes?"

"Oh, no. The perks of flying private." He laughs, his dark hair bouncing obnoxiously as if he's telling some grand joke that requires his whole body to get into the gesture. His eyes fix on me when his face stills. "I can leave whenever I want."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Poisoned.

Hours after the doctor left, the word still haunts me.

Somebody is trying to kill me.

Maybe it shouldn't come as a shock. When I think about the complete one-eighty my life has done in the past week, it's actually terrifying. I've gone from stressing over what I'm going to do with the rest of my life—which is no small decision—to near-constant fear for my life.

From the first moment Remington Boudreaux came smoldering into my life, nothing has been the same. He put me in a chokehold and interrogated me like he truly thought I was some sort of inept assassin. He threw me to the ground to spare me a bullet. He held me at gunpoint while he expressed his distrust of me. I was kidnapped, assaulted, sold off to some rich, likely sadistic fuck on the other side of the world, and committed murder in *at least* the second degree. And now to top it all off, I'm being fucking poisoned?

My head is the clearest it has been in days. It's like Remy's absence allows me to think, like when he isn't here, I'm able to focus on things beyond him. Maybe it's because I've been out of it for the last week or so, and now I'm inaccessible. Remy has given me a dozen reasons not to trust him—he's wrapped up in a darkness so deep that light doesn't even *try* to penetrate his world—and precious few reasons to think that he wouldn't try to kill me. After all, he's spilled his most insidious secret to me. Now that I know what he does, what his family has done, is it really far-fetched to

believe that he may regret that decision to come clean and try to shut me up preemptively?

But as much as Remy is the most likely suspect to poison me, it doesn't make sense. A man who has no qualms about killing— a man who I watched *stab someone to death*—wouldn't have qualms about killing me any other way. Besides, if I'm honest with myself, there is someone far more likely to be up to something than Remy.

They say poison is a woman's weapon, after all.

Elaine has looked at me funny from the very first time she saw me. She's tried to hide it, but she went to great effort to disregard me during that first night here, and—even more suspicious—she was totally different the next morning, offering me breakfast and coffee, calling me *dear*.

She offered me the last of the coffee, I remember. Remy and Rhea and Rhea's guest for the night had all drunk from a different pot of coffee than me. Did she pour out some of it to convince me she'd drank it, too?

I didn't experience any symptoms that day, but that was the beginning of the downfall for me. Maybe she worked with Jovich in devising a plan to get rid of me. It wouldn't be the craziest thing to happen since I've come to Costa Rica.

The doctor didn't want me to go back to Remy's, but it isn't exactly her choice. I'm not going to tell anyone the truth about what landed me in the hospital. Sure, Elaine's careful stitches did get infected… probably not until Remy and I fucked in a sweaty, bloody tangle. But that's not what was making me so sick. That was the methanol poisoning.

I have no clue where it could have come from if not from Elaine. She brought me what was supposed to be a sleep aid, and I *did* fall asleep. I assume her intention was for me to stay that way forever.

The knock on the door startles me out of my thoughts just in time to see Rhea toe the door open and poke her head in. "Come in." I say, leaning back against the pillows.

"Claire!" She sighs, rushing in and letting the door click closed behind her. Her words are muffled when she wraps her arms around me, liquid from the cup in her hand sloshing on the sheets as she squeezes me without reservation. "Thank God! You look so much better!"

"I *feel* so much better." I laugh, hoping it will ease the bubble of tension that sinks in my chest.

“I was so scared.” She shakes her head, banishing the thought as she disentangles herself from the IV and drops into the chair next to the bed. I see her eyes shining with tears for a second before she banishes those too. “I really don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Well,” I shrug, trying to make myself look more put together than I feel. “You aren’t getting rid of me that easily.”

“*Easy*.” Rhea laughs, her fingers drumming along the top of the cup in her hand. We both know that there is nothing easy about the last few weeks of our lives. Nothing has been *easy* since Remy walked into our lives… since her father died.

“You could have gone septic. I told Elaine we should bring you to the hospital when you first…” She trails off, shaking her head. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know how to take care of you. You’re the one who takes care of me.”

I laugh at that, because it couldn’t be further from the truth. I am a mess. I have been my whole life. I’m not capable of being anybody’s caretaker… not even my own. I’m going to change that, though.

“Shut up,” I tease. “Or I’m going to get sappy and start crying.”

“Well, we don’t want that. I don’t know about you, but I’m all cried out.”

Me too. I’m fucking tired of crying… giving my tears to others. It took everything out of me, and I’m finally getting back to something like normal. But her words sober me further.

“I’m so sorry I missed the funeral.” I tell her honestly. It’s not like I was looking forward to it or anything, but I did come all the way to this country with her specifically because she’d asked me to be by her side for her father’s funeral. And in the end, I hadn’t been there.

I know it’s irrational to feel guilty, but that doesn’t stop it from creeping in. Rhea is the person who saved me from myself all those years ago when we ended up as roommates. I’d do anything for her, even now.

“Stop.” She shakes her head, cutting me off abruptly. “Seriously, Claire, don’t apologize. I’m fine. I actually feel better now that it’s over. It’s like…” She presses her lips together while she tries to summon the word she wants. “I feel like a weight has been lifted off my chest… especially now that you look better.”

“I’m sure I look like death.” I cringe, hoping I’ll have a chance to shower before running into Remy again.

I probably shouldn’t care what I look like. I probably shouldn’t give a damn what he thinks about me. But I can’t stop the flutter that rises up in

me when I think of him.

“No, you looked like *death* yesterday. That doctor is a miracle worker. I’m going to have to bake her cookies or something.”

I laugh at the thought of her donning Elaine’s apron and mixing dough in the kitchen. The most baking I’ve ever seen her do involved dropping little misshapen squares from the package onto a baking sheet. “Maybe show your appreciation by *not* poisoning the doctor.”

It doesn’t occur to me what exactly I’m saying until the words are already said. But if Rhea notices, she doesn’t let on.

Of course, she didn’t notice. Because she didn’t poison you. She’s your best friend.

Rhea laughs, raising her hands in surrender. She seems to have forgotten about the cup in her hand, because when her eyes glance down at it, she holds it out to me. “I’m sorry, I forgot all about this. Elaine made you a pineapple blueberry smoothie. I know it sounds weird, but it’s actually delicious. It’s supposed to help with cellular healing or something like that.”

I stare at the tumbler between us; my hesitation doesn’t go unnoticed. “You okay?” Rhea’s voice oozes with concern, like she’s ready to spring into action to see what’s bothering me.

“I’m fine.” I promise again. “It’s just the thought of pineapple right now is making me nauseous.”

Rhea’s eyes narrow on me the slightest bit. “You *love* pineapple. I have to fight you if I don’t want it on my pizza.”

“I do.” I nod. “I just think the antibiotics are upsetting my stomach or something.” I take the cup from her and pop the lid open to sniff it.

The pineapple scent is overwhelming, but it actually makes my mouth water. I lost track of the last time I ate real food. I mean, the hospital food was actually pretty gourmet for a hospital. I suppose that has something to do with the fancy little suite I am in, but our talk of pineapple pizza has me craving something good.

As enticing as it is, though, I’m finally starting to feel human again for the first time since before everything unraveled; I’m not about to risk it.

“Okay, well I’ll set it here in case you change your mind,” Rhea sets it down on the table beside my bed and then turns back to appraise me. “Also, this is from Remy.”

She hands me a box, and my confusion must be obvious because she starts explaining before I even realize what I’m looking at.

“Since your phone got lost. We figured you’d need a new one while you’re here because I doubt that any of the channels on that TV are English.” She chuckles. “I told him I’m not leaving you here anyway, but you needed a new one anyway.”

I lift the lid and see that the phone is a few models newer than mine. It’s sleek and shiny and obviously brand new. It feels like an odd gift. Is it an apology for fucking me? Is it an apology for turning me into a killer?

“Tell him thanks, I guess.” I laugh.

“Tell him when you see him.” She rolls her eyes. “He drove me here but didn’t come in because he said he’s busy. He’s been weird since yesterday. Oh!” She covers her mouth with her hand, like she’s made a wild mistake. “You’ll never guess who was at the funeral!”

I grin in spite of myself. It feels good to get a little bit of our normalcy back, to just watch her launch straight into the theatrics. “Who?” I ask, because experience has taught me by now that she doesn’t want me to ruin her fun by guessing. Which is just as well, because I would never guess the name that falls off her tongue.

“Wes!”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I do a great job maintaining my composure in front of Rhea, even managing a laugh. “ *What a small world*.”

My voice sounds fragile, like it’s about to collapse in a cloud of dust. It’s how I feel when she tells me she invited him to dinner, it’s how I feel the whole way back to Remy’s house the next morning after staying for observation, how I feel as I turn the lock and glance around the small space that I’ve come to claim. It’s how I feel until I sink down on the edge of the freshly made bed and force myself to breathe through my nose.

When I close my eyes, it’s to see Wes smirking at me with that cocky grin, dripping with condescension. He’s not a good guy—no good guy would let himself be wrapped up in what he did. No good guy would tell a woman she doesn’t belong to herself anymore, ask her to bare herself to strangers on the internet, demand her to tell her captors who they own.

Whatever Wes is, it’s not good.

It’s not redeemable.

I assume Remy kept him alive for a purpose, and I highly doubt that purpose is to convince Rhea that he’s a good guy. So why isn’t he dead yet, disposed of in the same trash haul as Eric Giante? Given the way he unilaterally saved me, the way he killed my captors and Jovich, I don’t think Remy has it in him to forgive Wes for what he did. If he’s alive, I trust there’s a reason for it.

Whatever that reason is, it’s not to victimize me. I know that well enough, even if I don’t have any concept of where I stand with Remington

Boudreaux. He doesn't trust me, but he wants me. Or, at least, he *wanted* me. Maybe it's out of his system now. Maybe he worked through his lust for me after we committed murder together, and now we're just going to awkwardly orbit one another.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself.

I almost believe it, too.

We haven't seen each other since we killed together. That was days ago. I don't know how many, exactly, since I was out of consciousness for a while. The one night I do recall spending in the hospital – where Rhea slept in the chair beside me as I laid awake all night—had dragged on long enough to feel like multiple days. Despite not sleeping, I've been restless since leaving the hospital with the doctor's phone number tucked in my pocket… just in case.

I made sure to eat before I left so I can skip dinner and I doubt anyone will question it. Remy will know I want to avoid Wes, Elaine will assume I need the rest, and Rhea would think I simply wasn't feeling up to dinner with everyone. But Wes would know why I'm not there—he'd know that I'm scared of him, that I can't stomach the idea of facing him after what he did to me. He would know that he *won*, whether because I'm too weak mentally or physically to drag myself to dinner in his presence.

If there's one thing that I've learned about myself since leaving the states and getting swept into this chaotic world, it's that I am *not* weak. If I was weak, I never would have made it out of Eric's house. If I was weak, I never would have let someone pull me into the light so that I could heal. If I was weak, I'd still be in my head in that dirty warehouse, a prisoner of my own traumatized mind. And if I was weak, I wouldn't have found the mental or physical strength I needed to end another person's life.

Maybe that's not an achievement I should be proud of, but it's not something that the weak can claim to do. It took a lot of strength to drive that blade past flesh, through organs, and back out. It takes even more mental strength to look in the mirror every time I pass it with the realization that a killer is looking back at me.

I'm not weak, and I won't let Wes believe that I am.

Whatever cocktail they gave me at the hospital has given me new energy. Either it's a miracle drug or I just felt so horrible for so long that, by comparison, I feel like a new woman. I'm able to shower by myself, and

while it takes a little while to gingerly avoid my stitches, that just offers me longer to relax under the gentle spray of hot water.

When I step out and brush the wet hair from my face, I smile at the girl in the mirror.

She may be a murderer, but she’s also a badass.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I’ve tried to come up with every excuse in the world to keep Wes from coming for dinner, but Rhea is insistent. She all but told me to leave if I wouldn’t let her entertain a friend in my home, and that’s when I let my objections die. There is not a chance in hell I’m leaving him anywhere alone, let alone with my sister or Claire.

When we got home from the funeral and Claire was gone, I was ready to kill again. I think Rhea’s heart stopped, too, before Elaine came to tell us that she’d had her taken to the hospital. A fucking phone call would have been nice, but I suppose Elaine is still punishing me for whatever the hell is going on between us. She is the one who didn’t want to take Claire to the hospital to begin with. Maybe that’s why she waited to tell us. More likely, she was trying to be respectful of my father’s funeral. The funeral she planned but didn’t attend because she stayed back with Claire. And thank fuck she did.

We went to the hospital immediately, and I let Rhea have the time with her best friend while I waited on the other side of the door all night to ensure no one paid them a visit. Carmen assured me that the IV antibiotics were working like a charm and there was nothing to be worried about. She’s been on my payroll long enough to know that discretion was of the utmost importance, and so she assured me everything was off the books. As far as anyone is concerned, Claire Monroe was never a patient. But still, I don’t leave them.

I also don’t go in. The last I saw her, she was running from me. I’m not sure we are at a point of visiting her in the hospital… or even if she would want me to. It’s not like I’m going to take her flowers and sit there with her and Rhea trying to make small talk. Hell, she might kill me if I tried.

She intentionally avoided my eyes when we took her home this morning, so I let her have her space. But giving her space is killing me. I try knocking on her door one last time before I go downstairs, to let her know that I completely understand if she wants to hang out in her room and let her know that I’ll have Elaine bring her a plate. She doesn’t answer, which confirms my suspicion that she’s still avoiding me. I can’t really blame her, maddening though it is.

Dimitri and Michael are on red alert, and we’ve brought in a few extra bodies to secure the perimeter of the house tonight, making it impossible for Wes to slink away as I’m sure he’s planning. I’ve locked every door on the ground floor and instructed Elaine to set the table in the formal dining room rather than on the patio as we usually do. She does as I ask without question, though her eyes are still distrustful every time they glance over me. I wonder whether I’ll ever gain back her trust, if she’ll ever believe that I didn’t do anything to hurt Claire.

“Everything looks great.” I tell her when I step into the dining room and take it all in. She’s arranged the table almost intimately—the way my parents arranged their table when they had guests—with candlesticks in the center and deep red linens crisply folded at every setting. Two forks, two spoons, a steak knife. I didn’t bother asking what we were eating tonight, though I did consider sprinkling some rat poison overtop of Wes’ plate. I decided against it only because I don’t want the girls to witness such a brutal death. I think Claire could stomach it, given everything else she’s dealt with, but poor Rhea would probably have a stroke. Not to mention, the questions she would have in the wake of such a sudden, violent death would be hard to dismiss.

“You sound surprised.” Elaine says.

If the suspicious glances weren’t enough of an indicator of her irritation with me, her hard, flat tone is.

“Elaine,” I sigh.

“No, Remington.” She cuts me off with her hand, motioning for me to save my excuses. “We’re not going to discuss this now.”

“Are we ever?” I challenge, leaning against the wall and crossing my arms over my chest. When she looks up at me, her eyes are fierce, lit up with anger.

“I told you, I don’t know what to believe. All I know is that people who get involved with your family often end up dying young or living to regret it.” She bites her lip, like maybe she’s said too much, and then decides to drive it home. “I think Claire may already live to regret it, and it’s not too soon for her to die young.”

It’s my turn to narrow my eyes on her, suspicion stiffening my shoulders. “What is that supposed to mean? I don’t let anyone get close to me; you know that better than anyone.”

“Sure,” Elaine shrugs. “And yet, here you are and there she is.”

“It sounds like *you’re* the one making a threat, Elaine.” I take a step toward her so that I can see her eyes on mine more clearly, try to decipher if she’s hiding anything. “There’s still time for her to die young?”

Elaine opens her mouth and lets it snap shut quickly after. A smile finds its way to her face but it doesn’t make it to her eyes. I look up to see Rhea turning the corner, staring at her phone. She seems to sense our eyes on her or the shift in energy, because she glances up to look between us questioningly. When she says nothing, Elaine fills the silence. “You look great.”

“Oh?” Brushing the backs of her knuckles over her black skirt, Rhea laughs. “Claire asked to borrow a dress, so I figured I should match her energy.” She spins quickly, flipping her hair over her shoulder and languishing in Elaine’s applause.

She’s a little overdressed for the night, considering she looks like she is auditioning to work alongside Vanna White.

“Claire asked to borrow a dress… for tonight?”

“Yes.” Rhea shrugs. “I think she wants to look good for Wes. They hit it off back home, you know? He walked us home from the club and almost kissed her on the doorstep under the stars.” She sighs and then makes a gagging sound. “It was perfect and disgusting. That’s why I invited him tonight. I think seeing a familiar face will be good for her. And the fact that he’s here at the same

time as her? It’s like kismet.”

“He… kissed her?”

That is information I wasn't aware of—information that sets my blood boiling as I imagine his lips on hers, his tongue in her mouth, tasting what belongs to me.

He'd told me he had plans for her before I came along, but I hadn't realized what he meant. I didn't realize that she knew him prior to him taking her captive; The betrayal feels all the more disgusting than if he'd just snatched her off the street.

"I said *almost*." Rhea corrects me.

"Would have done more than that, if the stars aligned." I didn't even hear the door open, but when I turn, Wes is standing behind me, a smug little smirk tipping his lips up. "Of course, Claire's not that kind of girl, right Remy? She's a *good girl*."

Dimitri makes a big show of entering the house at that exact moment, stealing all the attention before either Elaine or Rhea can ruminate too long on what that was supposed to mean. "Oh," he stops short, his eyes sliding from Wes to me to Rhea. "It's Friday, right?"

"Yes." Rhea says, fixing him with an appreciative once-over. She doesn't bother veiling the interest in her voice, and I get the distinct impression that she didn't notice him the other day at the funeral. Good. "Who are you?"

"Dimitri," he says, extending a hand to her.

I haven't kept them from knowing one another on purpose. It just sort of happened that way. This is the first I've seen my sister since moving to Costa Rica, and he's been busy attending to other matters since she's been here. But now I know I should have made an effort to keep them apart. Dimitri looks at my sister like a puppy who just found the one he wants to go home with.

Rhea draws everyone's attention. She always has, and Dimitri is no exception. I just can't tell if she's simply being cordial or if she's interested in him, too.

"I'm sorry, Dimitri," I tell him. "I forgot myself this week."

"No poker then?" He guesses, pulling an excuse for his presence out of thin air.

I'd laugh at that if my nerves weren't so raw right now. I trusted him enough not to have made him rehearse a reason for being here, but maybe that's a mistake. He really expects Rhea to believe I have friends over on Fridays to play *poker*?

Elaine stifles a laugh, but Rhea's too busy ogling my new right-hand man to notice it, or to notice the look of irritation I shoot back at my housekeeper.

"I have guests." I explain, tipping my head toward the table that is set for four. "We're just about to sit down to dinner. Elaine, do we have enough for another guest?"

"Of course," Elaine smiles surreptitiously, not falling for our act. Of course, she already knows I do not host weekly poker nights. "Is Michael coming, too?"

As if on cue, I hear the front door open again. Michael stamps his feet, gathering our attention and then rounds the corner. "Sorry I'm late." He says, grinning cheekily.

Rhea lifts an eyebrow, turning her gaze on me. And then something seems to click in her mind. "Aren't you the ones who were with Wes earlier?"

Shit.

"Yeah," Dimitri shrugs. "We're old acquaintances."

"Huh," Rhea muses, studying his face. "Small world."

"Small world, indeed." Elaine says. "Why don't you all sit, and I'll start getting everything set out for you?"

Dimitri and Michael move as one, boxing Wes in so that he's forced to take the chair between them, opposite the one that Rhea pulls out. "Bring a plate for yourself, Elaine." I call after her.

I can't imagine Claire will actually come to dinner, so if Elaine sits next to my sister, I can sit at the head of the table, a last line of defense in case Wes tries to make a move.

"So," Wes' voice, whiny and high pitched, pierces the silence that's fallen around us in the split second since Elaine left us to take our seats. He's grinning like a cat who ate the canary and hasn't been caught. "Where's Claire?"

I open my mouth, prepared to tell him that Claire is feeling a bit under the weather, but it's not my voice that draws everyone's attention.

"I'm right here."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Fuck.

She doesn’t look *‘under the weather’* at all.

In fact, other than the night I met her shimmying out of her dress, she’s never looked better.

Her blonde hair has been swept off her shoulders, leaving her neck bare. The tops of her breasts are on display, held together by a tight red top, lacy and vintage looking—it showcases the light pink scar running between them, still healing but far less severe than her other injury on the top of one. It follows the curve of her breast perfectly, and I have the strangest desire to run my finger over it, to press kisses along that scar, to soothe it with my tongue.

More than the bright dress that hugs her every curve and betrays a hint of her thigh behind the slit, she looks amazing. The dark circles are gone—maybe just covered by makeup, but not so much that it covers the freckles dusting her nose. Her eyes pierce through me even though she’s not looking at me, the blue made brighter by the dark fringe of her lashes. I knew Claire was naturally beautiful, but seeing her all done up like this, I realize that’s not all she is. She’s dangerously sexy, and something in the way she walks toward us tells me she knows it— maybe not always, but definitely right now.

“You sexy *bitch*.” Rhea says, her jaw hanging open. “How do you look better in my clothes than I do?”

Claire laughs, slinking into the seat right next to Rhea—directly across from Wes. I've practically forgotten he's there, I'm so enamored with her, but the reminder smacks me right in the face when she looks him square in the eye and bats her eyelashes. "Wes."

"You'll have to keep that dress." Rhea says, oblivious to everyone around her holding their breath, tense with the possibilities of what this dinner will entail. "I can't bear to put it on again knowing I won't do justice to it."

"It's some dress," Wes concedes, allowing himself an appreciative look at her. "You're a vision, Claire."

Claire smiles at him knowingly, not looking the least bit uncomfortable. They're watching each other like they want to devour one another, a notion that doesn't sit well with me. She can't seriously be attracted to him after what he did to her. Can she?

Elaine rushes back in, placing empty plates in front of our 'unexpected' guests and setting one for herself on Rhea's other side. "Red or white wine?" She asks, glancing around the table. "I just opened a bottle of each."

"Actually, Elaine," Claire smiles when my housekeeper turns to her. "I'd love to pop that bottle of prosecco."

"Champagne?" Elaine sounds surprised.

"We're celebrating." Caire nods. "And as the toast giver, I'd like to pop the cork, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Elaine waves a hand, dismissing Claire's concern, and promptly leaves the room.

"What are we celebrating?" Rhea asks, her eyes bright as she leans into her best friend.

"You'll see." Claire promises.

We don't have to wait long, because Elaine comes around the corner in the next instant with the bottle in one hand, four long-stemmed flutes in the other. She sets them down, preparing for another trip to gather the rest. Claire wastes no time tearing the foil off the neck of the bottle, unbothered by all the eyes on her as she works.

Rhea tenses when she presses deftly against the cork, and a moment later it flies across the table with a resounding *pop!*

She had to have been aiming, though I didn't realize until after the cork hits Wes square in the nose and he yelps, cupping his face in his hands. "Oops," Claire giggles, pressing her red-stained lips together. At the same time, Rhea slams her hand over her own mouth in shock.

“You fucking bi—”

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what he was going to say, but it’s stifled when Dimitri shoves a napkin against Wes’ nose. His yell is deeper this time, and when he shifts, I see the blood that’s dripping steadily over his fingers.

“Oh my,” Claire says, her voice sickly sweet. “I’m *so sorry*, Wes. Are you okay?”

Elaine’s mouth falls open when she returns with the rest of the glasses. Claire takes them and pours a small measure in each glass, just enough to toast with, and hands them around the table. When she passes the last one to Wes, he drops the napkin, showing that the blood has stopped. He’s obviously attempting to look unbothered.

Claire leans across the table, and for a minute, I want to be where Wes is. I’m sure he has an eyeful as she leans into him and wipes blood from his lip like a concerned friend, smearing it just a little. “That’s *perfect*, Wes. You’re a natural at this.” She says, so softly that it’s clear the words are only meant for him. Combined with her touch, it looks like some sort of foreplay, an intimacy that has Elaine looking quickly away. “*So* fucking sexy.”

Her voice is dripping with sex, and for a moment, I’m pissed. Rage laces my spine, making me tense. The words echo in the base of my skull, and my anger grows— until I recognize where I’ve heard them before. When I do, I have to take a sip of my champagne to stifle my laughter. She’s throwing his own words back at him. The context might not be exactly the same, but Claire is making no effort to hide her intentions from him.

She’s fucking brilliant.

“Well,” Rhea chuckles. “I’d say get a room, but you’ll have to wait ‘til after dinner because I promise you don’t want to miss this. Elaine’s been slaving all day over this.”

“Slaving?” Claire blinks innocently. “How sweet of you, Elaine.”

Despite her words, she doesn’t exactly look charmed. Maybe she’s having a hard time differentiating right now between her cutting attitude toward Wes and everyone else. It’s worth whatever casualties we have to endure just to see her put Wes through his paces… hell, it’s worth it to just see her like this. She looks like a new woman.

“It’s my pleasure.” Elaine says, slipping into her seat. “So, what are we toasting?”

For the first time since she came downstairs, Claire turns to me. Just her attention on me is enough to send a static shock through me. It's primal. Raw. I want her—now more than ever. It's all I can do to not throw her on the table in front of all of them and take whatever she'll let me have.

The absurdity of that idea washes away with the smile on Claire's lips. She lifts her glass first to me, before turning to Elaine, quickly glancing at Rhea before swiveling on Wes.

His face is sour as he raises his glass, his jaw set in anger. "To good health." Claire says, smiling wide enough that she flashes her brilliant white smile. "And good fortune."

It's a simple toast, but it's full of implication for those who are aware enough to hear it. She may be acting right now, but if she is, she's putting on a show worthy of the academy awards. Claire won't let Wes think he broke her.

Honestly, I'm not sure he did.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I stick to the bottle of prosecco that I opened on my own as Elaine pours everyone glasses of wine, and I make it a point not to touch the water pitcher she places in the center of the table either. I will hydrate after dinner, when everyone is gone, and I can be sure that I'm not having something slipped into my drink. As for the food, I only take a small amount of each thing, looking all around to take note of whether Remy and Elaine are eating, what's on their plates. Not even a small part of me thinks that either of them would poison Rhea, so when she samples everything and then reaches for seconds, I feel a small measure of relief. But I couldn't eat a lot even if I wanted to. I'm full of fire, purpose, anger.

It's well contained. Like a pot that's bubbled over and been reduced to a simmer, my nervous energy is just rippling the surface, enough to keep me alive but not enough to show on my face. I hate Wes for what he did to me, what he was going to do, how stupid he made me feel.

I just refuse to let it show.

"So," Rhea says, leaning across the table toward Wes. She's a few glasses of wine deep, and the red that she spilled across the tabletop five minutes ago is also spilling across her cheeks. It's weird… with her complexion, I don't notice her blush very often. In fact, I'm not sure she ever *has* blushed in front of me, given that nothing seems to embarrass her.

I notice I've been watching her a second too long when I glance up and my gaze collides with Remy's, sending a shockwave through me. I suppress

the shudder that wants to lace my spine, sinking my teeth into my lip to distract from the other things he inspires with a single look.

“How long are you here for?”

I’d like to know the answer to that as well. I’d like to know what Remy is planning to do with the waste of air sitting across the table from me, his lips quirked in an insufferable smirk as his bright eyes glance over me. “Indefinitely.” He says.

It’s not much of an answer, but it’s enough for Rhea. “Perfect!" She claps her hands together like that’s just settled something, startling Dimitri, who looks up from his plate to see what the commotion is. I see his arm move, his hand drifting to his waist, and though it’s obscured by the table, I can tell he’s reaching for a gun just in case he needs to be ready.

It seems ridiculous to have a man who’s easily startled be in charge of anything such as ensuring Wes doesn’t escape, but I don’t know anything about Dimitri. For all I know, he’s just nervous to be promoted given Jovich’s death. For all I know, he was working with Jovich and he’s trying to finish what his mentor started. Maybe he’s the one who’s been poisoning me… he clearly clings to the shadows like he’s made of them. It probably wouldn’t be too difficult for him to slip past Elaine and sprinkle a bit of arsenic in my water.

Except, I wasn’t poisoned with arsenic. It was methanol. Formaldehyde. Someone tried to embalm me alive.

I almost laugh at the absurdity that is my life.

I feel like I’ve been fighting the tide for as long as I can remember, swimming against the surf. Found a family that you enjoy being a part of? Can’t have that, we have to rip her away. Made a friend after starting school later than everyone else? Time to move and find a new school. You see the light of adulthood just around the corner and dare to hope? Enjoy this last placement with a vile waste of human space.

Living with Rhea, I’d learned to stop fighting the current and just *float*. It was stupid to think that I could float forever. Maybe I need to stop trying to swim against the waves that are always stronger than me, stop floating aimlessly, and start learning to surf the waves instead.

My skin tingles with the sensation of being watched. It snaps me quickly back to reality, though I’ve missed a large part of whatever conversation just transpired. It’s not Remy or Wes who is sending the prickling over my flesh, though I do notice they’re both looking at me.

“Hmm?” I murmur, refusing to admit that I zoned out and missed something.

“Where do you go, Claire?” Rhea laughs. “Cause you may be sitting here looking all fierce as fuck in that dress, but I can tell you’re spacing.”

“You’re right.” I laugh. “Sorry, I just started thinking about how when we get home, I may take up a new hobby.”

“Oh?” I’ve piqued her interest. “And what hobby is that?”

“Surfing.” I lift the bottle of prosecco to my lips and let the bubbles explode against my tongue. When I set it back on the table, I see that Rhea is staring at me in shock. “You know how much I love the water.”

“That’s so random.” She shakes her head. “But you should do it. I don’t know if the surf is good, or whatever the kids say, but Laguna Beach is the perfect road trip distance.”

I didn’t even realize Elaine had left the table until she sets a fresh glass next to me, which I ignore, and then refills a few of the wine glasses scattered around the table. Michael refuses her politely while Dimitri takes it but then sets it aside immediately.

Elaine doesn’t offer Remy one, and I don’t peg him as a wine drinker, but he stands and takes the one that his bodyguards or employees discarded.

I’m enamored, watching him lift it to his lips and take a perfunctory sip, his tanned arms thick and strong against his rolled-up sleeves. I want to feel those arms wrap around me, feel his warmth. When he sets the glass down again, his eyes find mine. “Start now.”

I’m not sure if he thinks I really have any interest in surfing or if he is somehow in my head, knowing what I’m thinking. But it doesn’t matter, because when Rhea asks, “Start what?”, he grins.

“Start surfing now. I can teach you.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

“You surf?” Rhea scoffs. She’s had a fair amount of wine, which is why I decide not to take offense to her disbelieving tone.

“Rhea,” I laugh. “We grew up on the beach. I live on the water. Of course, I learned to surf.”

Claire laughs too, commanding my attention. She looks transformed… not like the girl I brought into my home, and also not like the girl I pulled out of the warehouse a few days ago. It’s somewhere between comforting to see her recovering and also unsettling that the innocent girl who came here on my plane seems to be gone. This Claire, I decide, is most similar to the woman who threw herself at me with fire in her eyes. This is the woman who I painted with the blood of her living nightmare, the woman who I fucked fast and hard, but who deserved for me to take my time.

God, I want a redo. I want to lay her down and explore every inch of her body, both the parts that I covered with blood and the ones that I didn’t. I want to taste her on my tongue again, feel her hair wrapped around my fist, learn the noises she makes when she’s about to detonate. I want to consume her. This Claire is fucking divine, and I want to worship her the way gods deserve.

“Are you doubting me?” I smirk.

“No,” Claire laughs. “It’s just… I’m trying to imagine you outside of… this.” She gestures to me as if that single word is capable of explaining whatever is in her head.

“This?”

“Yes, *this*. Imagining you outside of this ‘all business’ persona.”

“I think,” Wes pipes up, “that she is saying she is having a hard time imagining you without a stick up your ass.”

Cocky motherfucker.

I deliberately ignore him, which isn’t too hard as I’d forgotten he was there anyway, looking morose between my two men. “You’ve seen me without *all this*.”

It’s a bold admission, considering my sister has explicitly warned me not to mess with her best friend. It says enough without saying too much, while also being rife with innuendo. I also don’t know if Claire will be angry at me for exposing that information, though the color that rushes to her cheeks doesn’t look like it’s put there entirely by embarrassment. She holds my gaze.

My cock twitches, restless with the memory of being inside her—a memory I wholly intend to recreate.

“Wow, Claire,” Wes demands our attention again. I was capable of disregarding him when he addressed me, but hearing her name on his tongue sends rage rippling down my spine. I hate that he’s even here, breathing her air, let alone looking at her.

He waits until everyone collectively turns to him—even Dimitri and Michael are watching him expectantly. He eats up every moment of it, tossing me a glance out of the corner of his eye to make sure that I’m listening. “If I’d known all it would take to get you to drop your panties was to tell you I was rich, I’d have told you before I dropped you on the doorstep.”

My chair scrapes the floor as I move on instinct, ready to bash his head against my table and use his hair to mop up the blood he sheds. Dimitri beats me to it, jumping out of his seat. His fist is already flying through the air, colliding with Wes’ jaw.

Rhea jumps up too, covering her mouth but failing to suppress a delicate scream.

Elaine rushes into the room, nearly dropping the platter of cheesecake when she catches a glimpse of Wes on the ground, Dimitri’s knuckles sending blood splattering across the tablecloth. By the time I drop to Dimitri’s side and place a gentle hand on his shoulder, he’s gotten a good beating in on my insufferable half-brother. That smug smile on his face is gone for one thing, and blood trickles from his lip and floods his mouth.

Dimitri stops immediately once I bring him to his senses, rising and adjusting the collar of his shirt as if he's just done something undignified. I quite enjoy the view of Wes on the ground, though, whimpering in pain. Though his face was previously untouched, he's taken quite a beating to the rest of him this week… kicks, punches, the few shallow wounds left when I sliced him with a blade… the same one, I assured him, that we'd used to kill Giante while he listened, helpless, in the next room, waiting for his turn. A spot of blood on his stomach, still spreading over the starched white shirt I had to lend him, assures me Dimitri got in a jab or two below the collar… he may even have to stich Wes back up again.

"Apologies," Dimitri says, straightening his tie and turning toward Claire and Rhea as if he's just blown Wes' head off in front of them. It's not a necessary apology, though I do prefer to have my sister far removed from the violence of this world. I also don't like her to hear a man spouting disrespect and getting away with it. "I just got angry. The disrespect."

Rhea blinks, wide eyes matching her gaping mouth. She's too stunned to notice that right next to her, Claire is grinning wide with amusement. She wipes it away with a long swig from her bottle, wrapping her hands around the neck and tipping it back. I reach a hand out to Wes, who's struggling to sit up despite one hand pressed against his stomach. When he grabs my elbow, allowing me to hoist him up, I consider getting in a hit of my own. But there will be time for that later, so I pull him in so that only he can hear my harsh whisper. "You don't talk to her. You don't say her name ever again. And if you so much as look at her, I'll send Michael to your room tonight with boiling bleach so that the last thing you see in this world is my cellar. Hmm?"

"Um," Rhea laughs nervously, noting that our embrace has lasted a touch long. "You guys good?"

I let go of him, causing Wes to lose his balance enough that he has to grip the edge of the table to keep from swaying on his feet. "My apologies, Claire." A thrill of satisfaction floods through me as he mumbles the words without seeking her face, though I notice he said her name. He'll pay for that later. "I forgot myself for a moment there. Perhaps I've outstayed my welcome."

He absolutely has, considering I never wanted him here in the first place. When no one objects, Michael stands, buttoning his jacket. "Well, that was an interesting poker night, but I think someone should drive him. I'm not

sure your friend should be driving with blood in his eyes. The roads are so dark at this time of night."

Wes opens his mouth, but Michael's firm hand on his shoulder surely tells him there's no room for negotiation here. "Thank you for dinner," he says, wiping blood from his face with the linen napkin. As he drops it on the table, he looks for a moment as though he's about to meet Claire's gaze.

But he's smarter than he looks sometimes. He smiles at Rhea instead. "It was lovely seeing you again."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

“What the ever-loving fuck was that?” Rhea demands, blinking into the space Wes has just vacated. She looks scandalized—not something that I see on her often.

I can feel the weight of Elaine’s eyes on the back of my neck and have to suppress a shudder at the feeling of vulnerability that passes over me. Instead of letting myself shudder, I roll my shoulders. “I think Wes was feeling a bit… *emasculated*.”

“But Dimitri?” She turns her eyes to Remy, demanding an explanation. I don’t know how he managed to keep all of this from her for as long as he did—he deserves a medal for it, honestly. Because in the space of the week that I’ve been in on his sordid secrets, we’ve pushed the envelope too far. Rhea is brilliant and airy and fierce and gentle, but she’s not stupid. We won’t continue to get away with leaving her out of the loop, and I intend to tell Remy that as soon as I get him alone, which I *really* need to do.

“I’m sorry, Rhea.” I huff, clutching my stomach and crinkling my face. “I’m not feeling well. Do you mind if I go back to my room?”

Her eyes track to mine, her mouth open like she’s about to say something, but then she softens. “Of course.”

“I’ll help you upstairs.” Remy offers, stepping forward to loop his arm through mine. I don’t know if he’s just attempting to be chivalrous or if he caught the look of desperation I threw him over his sister’s shoulder.

“I’m giving you a pass because Claire is hurt,” Rhea says seriously. “But I want answers. So, get your story straight when you’re upstairs together

and then be prepared to spill it all next time I ask."

I fight the laugh that bubbles in my throat—it's not funny, but I am feeling wildly untethered. I've never drank so much champagne, and the combination of that with the oh-so-euphoric feeling of flaunting myself as unbroken before Wes has me uninhibited.

As soon as we clear the hall, I push Remy against the wall and cover my hand with his mouth. I'm not even sure why, other than the urgency of the matter.

His eyes are molten, confused, but very clearly willing to go wherever I'll take him. "Wes stole a knife." I tell him. "When he stood up, he slipped it into his coat pocket."

He stares at me for a second, like he's wondering whether to believe me or maybe mourning the moment that he thought was about to pass. "Let's hurry then." He practically pulls me in the direction of the stairs, but I shake out of his grasp.

"I'm fine. Go stop him."

His hesitation is brief, and then he nods, spinning on his heel and stalking fast through the living room at a pace that's just a touch more than casual, but not as suspicious as a full-out sprint. He shuts the door softly, and once he's gone, I poke my head back in the dining room. "Thank you for dinner, Elaine." I tell her.

She looks startled when I call her name. By the time her eyes meet mine, the smile in place feels insincere.

"Would you like dessert? I can bring you a plate?"

"Oh, no." I laugh. "I'm afraid I'm stuffed. Rhea?"

Rhea looks up to me from where she's gathering the discarded linens, her agitation obvious on her face. We don't do this to each other. We don't fight, we don't lie, we don't keep secrets other than the things from our pasts that we never divulged to one another. But she has been my lifeline, my everything these last three years. I was so broken when we met, and she helped heal me. Someone has tried to break me again—maybe even the universe this time—and if I'm going to get past it, I need to come clean.

Half of the story is not mine to tell. I won't betray Remy's trust, even though Rhea is my priority. I can't be the reason she has to question her entire life. I can't be the reason he has to worry about how she will move forward. I'll support him if he decides to divulge the truth about their

family business and the Boudreaux's wicked legacy, but until he does, I'll give her my truth.

"I need to talk to you."

The slight narrowing of her eyes hurts a little, but her suspicion isn't unfounded. She sighs, dropping the linens on the table and then cracks a smile. "I thought you'd never ask."

When she reaches my side, she nudges me gently in the ribs. Laughing, we leave Elaine with her dark eyes following us… but not before I nick my champagne off the table. I'm going to need it.

Rhea turns toward the staircase, but I shake my head and pull her toward the back door. I don't want to be in my room. It's beautiful, comfortable, clean. But it's started to feel like a cage.

"Where are we going?" She asks, suspicion coloring her tone as I pull her outside, away from the patio and in the direction of the trees. "I know you're annoyed with me, Claire, but you don't have to kill me."

I laugh hard enough that it actually does hurt my stomach. The pain is dulled by the buzzy feeling of the alcohol in my veins, but I take it as a sign to slow down a little. The last thing I need to do is re-injure myself and end up stuck in that damn bed again. Not now that I feel more alive than I have in… I don't know how long.

"I thought you were the one who said you wanted to go hiking?"

"Oh, the itinerary went out the window after—"

"After I got myself kidnapped?" I chuckle.

Saying it with such a lightheartedness feels good. It's all so fucking heavy. Now that I feel it lifting off my shoulders just a little, I want to keep laughing it off. Every time I do, the burden eases just a little and I regain some control of the breath in my chest. And God does this prosecco help. It feels like the bubbles are in my veins, like I can float away from all of it.

"Claire, that's not—"

"It's what happened." I laugh. "Come on, we're almost there."

Leaving the light behind us, I pull her toward the boardwalk. When we step under the canopy of trees, the night gets inky dark, and every sound seems amplified by the echoing treetops arching high overhead. I don't recognize all of the sounds, though I can certainly hear the crickets screaming their nighttime symphony.

"I haven't been this way in ages." Rhea says, stepping closer to me as we walk side-by-side.

We could have sat on the porch, but I'm craving the freedom of the open ocean. Watching it from a distance wouldn't give me the solace I need to get through this, and if we'd walked along the shore, I wouldn't be able to hold the composure Rhea deserves. I can't fall apart, because if I do, she will follow me, and then I'll only feel worse about it.

When the path opens ahead of us, I see that my assessment was correct. The moon is full and low, pale but bright enough to illuminate the sky and the water. It drives away the darkness, the feeling of imprisonment, the heaviness in my heart.

"Nice boat." Rhea says, glancing at me from the corner of her eye. Her lips are creeping into a mischievous grin. "Tell me he keeps a key on here."

"I don't know." I laugh. "Can you even drive a boat?"

"Of course I can drive a boat." She scoffs, like that's the thing you learn to do after you learn to walk but *before* you begin reciting your ABC's.

"Of course you can." I agree with a grin.

Because there's nothing she can't do.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

They’re already pushing the door of the guest house open by the time I burst through my front door and spot them. I’m sure that Wes is waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike, smart enough to know that they can outdraw him in seconds. Dimitri and Michael are both trained, and while I don’t know the extent of Wes’ resume, I think pretty boy is used to being a shot-caller and not doing the dirty work. And lucky for me he is, because he botched things with Claire’s kidnapping, which allowed me to find her before they could get far.

I cross the yard in less than a minute and burst in behind them. My entrance catches everyone by surprise—a surprise that Wes uses to his advantage. He gets in a quick slice at Michael’s neck, catching him off guard enough that he drops his grip on Wes’ other arm and raises his hands to cover the wound. I don’t even have a chance to see how deep it is because Michael’s thick hands obscure it and blood seeps out over his fingertips, dripping quickly onto the carpet.

I stare at Wes, fury setting me on fire. I left the house quickly enough that I didn’t bring any sort of protection with me, but that knife doesn’t scare me. What scared me was this monster sitting next to my sister at dinner, thinking he’d outplayed me. It’s Rhea they were after when they got Claire, so neither of them is safe. For all I know, he sat through Elaine’s dinner while scheming exactly how he was going to try and hurt them.

I won’t let that happen.

Dimitri has already drawn his gun—he cocks it at Wes' head and takes a step closer, but Wes isn't stupid. He's got one of my knives still pressed against Michael's throat, though further to the side this time, a vulnerable spot that Michael's hands can't conceal. I can see the white ripple of his skin as Wes digs the tip into his flesh enough that a single slip would cause the blade to slice into him again.

It's just a steak knife—not like he had access to a meat cleaver at dinner. But it's enough to give him an advantage over Michael, and enough to keep Dimitri from pulling the trigger. I don't gamble with people's lives. I take what I need when I need it, never putting anyone in needless jeopardy, but I know Michael would agree that the risk of him breaking free is too great to take when the girls are in the house unprotected.

Wes grins, looking maniacal with the blood dripping down his face. "What's wrong, brother? You don't think I'm going to stay your prisoner?" His laugh is a little too loud.

"For a bit longer," I shrug, closing the distance between him and I with every step I take toward him. "You see, I'm waiting on your father to send the cavalry. Can't have you run off before the rescue party shows up."

He only laughs at that, though his eyes shift from me to Michael nervously, trying to assess where to keep the blade. If he leaves it at Michael's neck, it leaves him vulnerable. But if he points it toward me, he leaves Dimitri with a clear shot to take. Dimitri's already got him on lock, but Wes is desperate, and that desperation has him acting like a rat in a cage. "My father doesn't care about me. If you think you can bait him with me, you're dumber than you look, Boudreaux."

"You aren't the bait." I assure him, coming to a stop just outside of his reach so that he can't slash out at me.

"No?" He laughs. "Then what am I?"

From the corner of my eye, I see Michael sway a little on his knees. He corrects himself before Wes can notice to try and take advantage of it, which tells me he's going to be just fine once I have my stupid half-brother tied up again.

Dimitri would have pulled the trigger already if I had given him the greenlight, but a gunshot would inevitably catch Rhea or Elaine's attention. It would be hard to explain away.

"You're a doctor, right?" I scoff. "Shouldn't you be smart?"

“Now, now,” Wes chides. “Don’t be jealous. You could make something of yourself too, if you’d just let go of the things you let tie you down and liberate yourself. It’s better that way.”

The things that tie me down.

He’s talking about Rhea, Claire, *human decency*. He doesn’t know that I do more than just keep myself separate from the part of our world that he is intimately familiar with. He thinks that all these years I’ve buried my head in the sand and just moved their money where and when they told me to. He still doesn’t know that I’ve actively gone behind them, that I’ve used their own money to bid on some of their victims and bought them a new life. Wes doesn’t know that humanity is wasted on him, but I’m going to make sure he learns before he dies.

“You told me yourself that they’d come for Claire. You’re not the bait. She is.”

That earns his silence while he contemplates my words, trying to gauge whether I’m lying. “I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t you?” I laugh, lunging at him so suddenly that it takes him by surprise. He lashes out in response, the knife finding purchase on my chest. It’s not enough to stop me from grabbing his neck and driving him into the wall, particularly given that he’s outnumbered. Dimitri takes the opportunity to lunge forward, pressing the muzzle of the gun against his forehead, his skin rippling out around it with the pressure Dimitri’s using to drive it into his flesh.

The click as he cocks it has Wes straighten and drop the knife, attempting to regain his dignity. “Okay, I’ll bite. Claire is the bait. What am I?”

“You?” I sigh. His eyes study me intently, like there’s so much more that he’s not saying, and he’s trying to figure out what *I’m* not saying.

He doesn’t even see my fist until after I land a punch square on his nose, which gives a satisfying crunch as the cartilage bends and fractures under the pressure, causing further damage to the spot Claire got him with the cork earlier. His blood flows like a faucet over his fingertips, splashing thick droplets of blood to the floor to mix in with Michael’s.

He mutters something unintelligible that I can’t distinguish with his mouth choked with blood. I tip my head for Dimitri to attend to Michael, so he eases back and holsters his gun.

I shove my hand over Wes’ mouth and watch the panic flicker to life in his eyes as he chokes on his own blood, unable to breathe through his nose

any more than he can through his foul mouth. He isn't small by any means, but I know as well as he does that he's outmatched. The element of surprise is the only thing that may allow him to throw us off, but that's been lost thanks to Claire's keen eye.

I let him stew in his fear a moment, thinking I'm about to let him suffocate, before I drop my hand and give him the answer he's been waiting for.

"You, dear brother, are just a distraction."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I haven’t figured it all out yet, but I know that this is something I have to do. I will do my best to skirt the details that are muddied by her brother’s involvement, which means telling her I’m a murderer is off the table. That one is probably for the best. I’d like to think her love is unconditional, but how could anyone love a killer?

I won’t even bother burdening her with an impossible task. In reality, she’s always jokingly referred to me as the person who would ‘help her hide the body’, proving the depths of our friendship. But when the context ceases to be fictional, would the sentiment be the same?

We hop the side of the boat one after another, laughing as we do. It feels like we’re doing something wrong, and maybe we are. I don’t know what Remy would say to us trespassing on his boat, but Rhea is his sister, so it also just feels about as normal as sitting down at his table.

Rhea makes a cursory look in the cockpit space, running a hand along the seats and over the deck, but doesn’t find a key. She lets out a humph and then tips a thumb toward a door I hadn’t noticed before. “Let’s get some drinks before we get into it. You’re going to need it.”

Rhea smirks playfully, but I’m pretty sure she’s actually right. I drank half the bottle myself, but the champagne buzz is fading a little, dulled by the reality of what I’m about to do. The truth is a heavy thing—wicked and cruel. I tried to run from it, tried to ignore it, tried to surrender to it. The truth is darkness, and I’ve fought it for so long that I don’t know how to stop. So I’ll embrace it, instead. I’ll lean into it, let it slip into me so that I

can learn to shape it into something that I can coexist with. I don't know if Rhea will be able to do the same, or even if it will weigh on her as it does on me.

Though he apparently doesn't leave the key lying about, Remy does keep the cabin unlocked. Rhea opens it easily and flips a switch, setting off a strip of blue light that illuminates the entire space. There's a goddamn kitchen on this boat, and it's almost as big as the one in the apartment I share with Rhea.

"Nice," Rhea says, sounding like she's just making idle commentary rather than actually impressed by it. I'm about to ask why she said it like it wasn't a surprise, but then I realize she said she knows how to drive a boat. She's probably been on boats like this her whole life and is unfazed by it.

She opens the fridge and there's clanking of glass as she moves bottles around a minute before emerging with her arms laden. "Are we expecting company?" I tease, eyeing the bottles to see a mixture of beer and hard seltzers that she sets on the counter.

"Just thirsty." Rhea laughs, twisting the top off one of the bottles and handing it to me before sticking her head in a cabinet and rummaging for something.

"Ooh, Doritos," Her voice is muffled, but when she places a bag on the counter and dives back in, it confirms what I thought I heard.

"We just ate dinner." I tell her, taking a sip of my drink while she keeps looking for whatever it is that she can't seem to find.

"They're for later." Rhea says confidently. And then she makes a noise of excitement, and retreats from the cabinet with a clear plastic bag in hand. It takes a moment to figure out what the contents are, but I put two and two together and shake my head.

"Seriously?"

"Come on, Claire." She says. "I buried my father yesterday."

I open my mouth to try and say something that doubtless wouldn't serve to make things any better, but I'm cut off by another voice that makes my spine tingle. "You didn't do any of the work as far as I recall."

A feeling like pins and needles tickles the space between my shoulder blades. I know he's staring at me—his eyes on me always have this effect, making my skin feel like it's stretched too tight. My heart starts beating a little faster. If he's here, I assume he has dealt with Wes. But how did he know where to find us?

“Whatever,” Rhea laughs. “I’m going to get a little high. I think I deserve it after a week in the fucking twilight zone.” She glances pointedly from Remy, who I still haven’t turned to greet, to me. “I’ll leave you alone to get your story straight… or to bend Claire over the couch. Whatever.”

My mouth drops open, though I shouldn’t be shocked. She’s always been blunt. It just feels rawer than ever before since she hasn’t bothered to hide her lack of amusement at the fact that Remy and I have been spending so much time together. My guilt probably plays a part in that too.

I open my mouth again, feeling the need to apologize, but she sweeps past me, scooping her provisions into her arms as she goes.

When I hear the door shut, I feel him move behind me and fight to maintain my composure. It nearly slips when his voice comes near my ear, his breath tickling the shell of it. “You shouldn’t be out here.”

Biting my lip, I take a little breath to try and get back into the right rhythm and turn to face him. I don’t smile—just raise an eyebrow, challenging him to answer the question I’m about to ask. “Why? You going to punish me?”

I meant it to come across saucy, but when the words actually leave my lips, I feel the blush creeping over my skin.

“Don’t tempt me.” Remy groans. I realize his face is serious, his eyes molten at the possibilities of what I just said. I don’t even know where that came from, but I like the effect it had upon him.

“Where is he?”

Remy knows who I’m talking about, though he looks irritated at the mere thought of him. “Not where he belongs.”

I wait for him to elaborate.

After a moment, he does. “He belongs six feet under the ground. But he’s been neutralized for now.”

I think about asking why he is keeping Wes, but I decide to bite the bullet myself before he can put the proverbial gun to my head. “I’m telling Rhea the truth.” The silence between us unfurls as he appraises me thoughtfully and I wait for him to say something. He doesn’t, so I rush to fill the quiet. “She deserves to know what’s going on. I can keep you out of it, but I—”

“No.” He shakes his head.

“Remy,” I start to protest, but he lifts a finger, prompting me to stop trying to argue with him before I ever even begin.

“I’ll fill in the gaps.”

He doesn’t say how he’ll fill in the gaps, and I don’t ask. I simply trust that he will.

I dust a finger along the rim of my beer, the champagne forgotten as I try to organize the chaos in my head into something that will make sense. I’m not sure that’s even possible, so I tip the bottle back and chug it before I can stop to notice how bitter it is. When I set the empty bottle back down, I exhale a laugh. “Do you have anything stronger?”

Something flickers in his gaze—judgement, perhaps—and then he cracks a grin and steps forward. His move pushes me back against the counter as his body lines up with mine, his hips just barely pressing into my stomach as he reaches over my head and produces a bottle half-full of dark liquor. “Will bourbon do?”

I don’t bother looking at the label. I’m too enamored with the way his arms are caging me in as he retreats slowly. My eyes flick down to the stretch of tight abs that peeks out from the bottom of his shirt. I angle my palms behind me so that I can grip the counter, better to resist the random urge telling me to reach out and touch him.

It’s not until he steps away and tilts his head a little that I realize he’s waiting for an answer. “Yes.” My voice wavers, but he seems to assume it’s uncertainty that makes that happen and lets it go. He turns to another cabinet to gather glasses, and I find myself staring at his ass.

“I’m going to go sit down.” I say in a rush, barely managing to get the words out before backing through the door as fast as I can without breaking out into a sprint.

Rhea sits on the bench, a joint pinched between her fingers, her legs curled under her, and a not-entirely-unamused smirk on her face. “All good?” She teases, taking me in.

“Yes.” I shrug, swiping my hair off my neck and sitting down opposite her. There’s a small tabletop between us, and I drum my fingers against it until she laughs and hands me the joint. I take it simply to occupy my fingers, but when I take the first hit, it fills me with a sort of impending calm, like it’s filling my lungs with all the air that’s been missing since the night Remy and I were together.

I’d never done any sort of drug prior to meeting Rhea. We don’t do it often, but she uses it every once in a while to de-stress after exams and I use it every once in a while to supplement my lack of social skills when I let her drag me along to parties and events that are outside of my comfort zone. It’s

about as taboo as underage drinking on a college campus, but we're lucky to have our own place off-campus and live in a state where it's been legalized. I don't know if it's legal in Costa Rica, but it hardly matters. I don't think murder is legal anywhere, and that ship has already sailed into hell with a spot saved for me.

I pass the joint back to her, regretting that I didn't change out of this stupid dress. It feels absurd to be sitting here with her smoking weed on a docked boat with my tits on display… particularly given the things we're about to discuss.

Remy joins us a moment later, dropping onto the bench beside his sister and setting up the glasses on the table in a perfect line. When he sets the bottle before her, Rhea straightens a little, her eyes lighting with excitement. "You're bringing out the good stuff." Her eyes flick from the bottle up to him, then to me, guarded with suspicion. "What's going on?"

Remy is silent as he pours two fingers in each glass and then slides one to Rhea and one to me before taking the last for himself. He doesn't sip it though—he stares into it solemnly, leaving Rhea to stare at him. I, on the other hand, don't hesitate, taking a long pull.

It's smooth and just the right blend of sweet and strong, tracing a warm path from the tip of my tongue down to where it settles in my stomach.

"Okay," Rhea says, puncturing the quiet. "You guys are scaring me."

I don't even know where to begin. I just know that if I don't start somewhere, I'll never start at all. Remy is quiet because he's giving me the chance to tell my own story, to control the flow of information. He told me that he read the entire police report, and coupled with what I've told him, he has a pretty complete picture of everything. But it's my cross to bear, my tragedy to carry on my shoulders until I learn to heal again instead of just ignoring everything, if that's even possible.

"Before we met, I tried to kill myself." I clamp my mouth shut, not sure why I decided to start there. I know she's seen the scars—they're light, faded well thanks to a prescription cream Addie gave me and the fact that I didn't cut deep enough. It's the true mark of friendship to accept everything about a person without knowing everything about them, and we've never needed to discuss this. Rhea has never asked about them, and while I've caught her gaze lingering, I think she's always just assumed that I went through a phase where I liked to hurt. I've never given her any reason to think otherwise. Since she has been a part of my life, I've never had a

reason to want to throw in the towel. I'm not suicidal anymore—just homicidal.

"Claire—" Her voice already sounds like it's about to break on a sob for me, so I shake my head.

"No, Rhea. If you want to know what we do, you need to be strong like I know you are. You need to let me talk and save your pity for someone else."

"I would never *pity* you." She says, sounding hurt. She reaches across the table, holding out a hand that I just stare at for a minute. "I hurt for you when you hurt, but I don't pity you."

I don't have any words for that. If I go off script, I may cry, and I really don't want to do that. I feel like if I start crying again, I'll never stop. So, I simply drop my hand in hers, a benefit to her more than it is to me, and carry on. "You know I got emancipated so that I could enroll in school earlier. I did that because I couldn't stay in my last foster home any longer. He was a really bad man…" I bite my lip. "One of the worst I've ever met."

I'd say *the* worst, but is what Wes did worse? Sure, they never got the opportunity to rape me themselves, but they were turning me over to people who would do so much worse than what Eric did. Something about being complicit, and being complicit on the scale that he is, makes me think that he's the greater evil. And that I should drive a blade between his ribs, too.

She stays blissfully quiet, and I focus on my nails, the pink polish cracked and chipped. I don't even remember when we had them done, but I know I tried to paint my life with a coat of polish, shiny and pretty to keep people from looking too closely. But it's cracked with time, peeling off in some places while holding stubborn in others. "He came to my room for months before I couldn't take it anymore. It's the kind of thing that you just learn to dissociate from. I'd leave my head when he was in my bed, and then after he left, I'd pick up the pieces. Once you get used to that sort of violation, it's easier to stomach the rest of the world's injustices."

I can't stomach the thought of looking at either of them right now—I don't want to see their disgust. I saw Remy's once already, and it was nearly enough to destroy me. He looked at me like I was damaged, and while it hadn't been enough to stop him from fucking me, I know it's enough to keep him holding back. If Rhea looks at me the way Remy did when he had me pinned to the wall as I confessed my darkest secret, I think my heart may just stop beating.

But as much as I don’t want to look at them, I’m turning the conversation over to Remy. He hasn’t figured it out yet, so I suck in a breath and pull my hand out of Rhea’s so that I can squeeze my own palms together, locking the fingers to try and keep the nervous energy from showing. When I look at him, Remy is watching me. My heart skips a beat, threatening to quit, but I’m not sure whatever I’m seeing in his eyes—which look more amber than green tonight—is disgust. It looks like anger, like pain, like the things that skitter around inside us so rarely that we don’t even have a chance to put names to them.

It's too much to bear, leaving me feeling like he’s just staring at me without any of my clothes on, so I glance away. When I look back, I tip my head toward him, indicating that I’m tagging him in for this part of the relay. He nods his understanding and angles himself a little more toward Rhea, who turns to him. Now that I know her attention is on him, I can stand to chance a glance at her. Her eyes are glistening, but unlike Remy’s, it’s the green in them that’s prevalent tonight. Her glossy lips quiver as she tries to hold it together while she waits, bewildered, for her brother to continue to crush her view of the world.

“Do you remember when I broke up with Monica?”

A strange heat spills through me at the mention of his ex-girlfriend, who I’d only ever known as the quiet but pleasant housekeeper at their Oregon estate. Monica felt like she was the house manager who made sure that everything was running smoothly and organized the cleaning and cooking and everything, while Rhea and I just stayed under her roof every summer and winter break. Though Rhea is cordial with her, they’ve never seemed terribly close, and yet she’s never seemed like just ‘the help’ either. But thinking of her as Remy’s girlfriend—a girlfriend he had wanted to build a life with—is the hardest thing to imagine, and I don’t know what it is that makes it that way.

“You mean when you brought her best friend over and fucked her in the kitchen?” Rhea laughs, but it’s condescending, disbelieving. She doesn’t understand the direction our conversation is taking her. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad one.

Remy ignores her, taking a sip from his glass and then watching as he swirls the contents around. He’s told me this story, although maybe not *all* of it. And it was probably easier to share it with me than it would be with her, because in doing this, he is about to shatter the view she held of her

father… the view she holds of the world. She's about to see just how cold a place it truly is.

"You also remember when dad took me to Amsterdam before that happened?"

Rhea makes a face like she doesn't understand why he's switching directions, but she closes her eyes a moment and then nods. "Yes. You were in a mood when you got back. It wasn't long before everything happened with Natasha."

"Yeah," Remy agrees. "We went to stay with Davos for a few days."

"I was pissed that you guys were taking vacation when mom wasn't doing well." Rhea chuckles. "It felt like you were just running away."

"I was being recruited." He smiles, and I think it may be the first time I've seen a smile on his face rather than a smirk or grin. And it's not even a happy one. It's a sad, wry smile, meant to cover the pain of the memory he's dredging up. "That was the weekend I found out what our family business really is. That was the weekend I found out that our father and Davos and thousands of others make their fortune off the backs of others."

A crease appears between her eyebrows as her confusion deepens, and then Rhea seems to remember I'm here and something clicks in her mind. It's just the first piece of many, but it falls into place, and I can see recognition following when she looks at me. "You mean…"

"They take women." Remy sighs. "Children and men too, but the women are their greatest asset."

"Take them." Rhea repeats slowly. "Like… *Taken*? Like, Liam Neeson hunting down his daughter *Taken*?"

I can't help myself. The laugh bubbles out of my throat before I can stop it, so I hold up my hand in apology and chase it away with another sip of bourbon that drains my glass. The alcohol burn warms my chest, but my toes are cold.

It's not funny, and my laugh isn't because I've found anything about it amusing. It's because it's all fucked, because I'm fucked, because how fucked is it that it was Rhea's last pick for movie night, and we watched it the night before Remy came along? We manifested our shitty future that night. Better to stick to cartoons from now on, I think.

"I guess." Remy shrugs. "I've never seen it."

Rhea looks momentarily gob smacked. Under any other circumstance, I'd have told Remy he was absolutely going to watch it, but I doubt I can

stomach that movie ever again knowing what I do now.

“It’s a highly organized operation, Ray. I’m talking government officials in not just our country, people who work in the law and public service, people on all sides who facilitate the actual destruction of innocent lives.”

Rhea watches him for a moment, and then laughter breaks across her face and her chest convulses with it as she turns back to me. It takes a moment for her to still enough to be able to speak, but when she does, her voice is still strained in her attempt to reign it in. “Good job, guys. You had me for a minute.”

Remy’s eyes cut to mine. I don’t need to contemplate what he’s thinking—his helplessness is written all over his face.

“Rhea.” My voice is soft, giving her pause enough to really look at me and realize as long as I’ve known her, I’ve never joked about anything like this. Making this all up for a laugh would be tactless, and she seems to realize as much. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say from here, but I don’t have to, because Remy resumes speaking.

“The night that I…” A quick, apologetic glance at me sends chills over my skin. I lift my glass to my lips by habit but remember that it’s empty, so I decide to help myself to more as he speaks. I’m not sure that all that I’m drinking is even enough to help, because I still feel oddly sober. “The night that Claire and I got into an argument, it’s because I found out about her past. I misunderstood and I judged her, and she was so desperate to get away from me that she trusted Jovich to take her to the airport.” He clears his throat. “But he didn’t take her there. He took her to someone that he knew was involved in the organization… someone he knew would get rid of her.”

Before I even realize what I’m doing, I’ve poured my glass full to the rim. I take it between my shaky hands and sip some off the top so that it doesn’t spill over when I lift it to my lips.

“Davos had some of his guys in the area, and Jovich delivered your best friend to them as well as if he’d served her up on a platter.”

My skin burns, but I don’t know if it’s from the anger in his words, the rage that the situation makes me feel, or the way he has taken personal offense to the injustices against me.

“Claire…”

Remy doesn’t give her a chance to finish whatever thought she’s having. “When you realized she was missing, I put two and two together. When

Jovich came back, I got him to confess that he turned her over to Davos and I thought maybe I could appeal to him. But by that time, the auction was already starting."

"The—" Rhea swallows thickly. "The auction?"

"Usually, assets are taken to one of their locations and assessed to determine their worth. But thanks to Jovich, they realized that Claire was important to you, which would make her important to me. And they used that to expedite the process."

Rhea sucks in a gasp and presses her hand over her heart. "Remy…" I warn. I'm not sure she can take hearing any more of this.

"You were right, Claire. She needs to know."

I stand and slide onto the bench next to Rhea, wrapping my arms around her. I'm not sure she even realizes I'm there until she reaches one hand up and rests it over my forearm lightly. This time, the comfort is more for me than her.

"Auctions are secure, encrypted. There's no warning for them, they just send out an invite and no matter where you are, bidding begins. That's what they did to Claire. I tried to outbid them, I tried to bargain with Davos, but he wasn't willing to help. So I killed Jovich for betraying us and I traced his GPS. He was an asshole, but he was a stupid asshole. I killed most of the men who were going to deliver Claire to Davos, but I took one of them hostage." He glances at me for just a moment before focusing back on his sister. "Wes is Davos' son."

It's silent as that revelation settles around us. I still don't know much about Davos, but he is obviously horrendous to do what he does. If I never hear his name again, it will be too soon.

"Wes? Like—"

"Yes." Remy agrees. "The man you sat next to at dinner sold Claire like an old car." He winces, realizing those words could be construed as careless, but they don't hurt. What hurts is the way Rhea is watching her beliefs of the whole world come crashing down around her.

"But Wes is Tristan Ryan's cousin. That's how we met." She shakes her head, trying to make sense of things that don't make sense to reasonable people.

"Yes," Remy nods. "And I don't think that's a coincidence that he just wandered back into your life."

“What?” She laughs now, disbelieving. “You think Tristan boring-as-paint Ryan orchestrated running into me over the summer so that he could hope I had a friend his cousin could kidnap?”

I’m not sure if Remy is going to tell her the most disturbing part of everything that’s happened, the part that will burn the ashes of her shattered innocence. “No,” Remy dismisses that idea. “Claire was never part of the plan. That was Jovich’s doing.”

The night air suddenly feels cold, and I wrap my arms tighter around her. “No, Ray. Claire was never part of the plan.” He swallows, struggling to say the words. “It was supposed to be you.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

My sister has been everything to me at some point. She was the star that stole my mother’s attention when she was born, the soft spot that served as my father’s only weakness, the best friend I could imagine growing up, the bane of my existence when she was a pre-teen. She has been my constant responsibility—my parents told me that the day she was born, and while I don’t remember it, I’ve heard it hundreds of times since then.

Protect those who can’t protect themselves. That was one of the most basic things I learned from my childhood, and it turns out that my parents didn’t obey their own rules. My father and his business partners prey upon the innocent, happily plucking low-hanging fruit to satisfy their own need for blood, violence, money. Maybe because they knew they didn’t follow their own example, they instilled this need to protect my sister from the world around her. I’d have done it even if they hadn’t made me.

But now I can’t protect her from something, and the pain that it’s causing her is obvious. It hurts me too. It hurts me to see the only person in this world that has ever meant so much to me drowning in pain that I’m causing. It doesn’t hurt as much as the accusation in her eyes, though, when she turns them back to me. Her tears only serve to make me feel more helpless, more ruthless. “You said that weekend you went to see Davos, you were recruited?”

“Yes.”

“So…” Her voice shakes over a single syllable. “You take part in all of this?”

Not in the way they do.

That's what I want to say, but I'm not going to sit here and try to convince my little sister that I know all of their dirty little secrets and I'm somehow better than them. There's freedom in knowing that I'm not better than them—just different. I kill those who hurt others, I move their financial assets, I cover up the transactions that would raise red flags with the IRS, and I help whoever I can when I can, but I'm not better. I played their game. I caved under their threat of violence, choosing to protect the last tattered shred of my family, knowing I'm in too deep to ever create one of my own. "Yes."

Rhea winces like I've reached out and slapped her. The tears start spilling down her cheeks unchecked, and I scrub a hand over my face. I'm fucking tired.

Rhea shrugs out from under Claire's touch and faces her so that her back is to me when she speaks again. "And were you involved in this?"

They're quiet for a minute, and then Claire says "what?", like she's been trying and failing to understand what Rhea meant by that question.

"I mean, are you really innocent in all of this or are you part of it too?"

I think I know what she's asking. It's the same thing I thought of when I first met Claire, the same suspicions I had when this random girl befriended my sister and somehow became more of a necessity in Rhea's life than her own family. "No." I answer for her. "Claire isn't involved in any of this other than Jovich deciding to trade her life for yours."

"I would trade myself for you, too." Claire breathes. I don't doubt the sincerity of her words, but they don't sit well with me. I hate the thought of her doing something like that, and I hate that the thought has any kind of effect on me at all. "I didn't orchestrate this friendship." Her laugh is a defeated sound, like she can't believe Rhea is really questioning her on this.

Rhea stands so fast she bumps the table. The liquid in Claire's glass sloshes over the side as she pushes past her.

Claire lets her go, quickly wiping a tear from her cheek. "Rhea, wait…"

My sister is already vaulting over the side of the boat, desperate to get away from me. I stand up, prepared to chase her, but Claire reaches across the distance, her hand falling on my arm. "Don't."

"I need—"

"She needs time." Claire sighs. "It's been the longest day in the history of the world, but the funeral was just yesterday."

I almost laugh.

The fucking *funeral*. I forgot it even happened. That means tomorrow is the wake—because Elaine enjoys torturing me these days, I think. She pushed it off a day for us because of Claire, but I wish she'd canceled it entirely.

As if sitting in that church praying it wouldn't burn down around some of the most despicable people to ever walk the Earth hadn't been bad enough. Now I have to sit in my house and listen to strangers, sociopaths, and criminals lament their grievances over my father's death.

"Do you think I could cancel the wake? Just lock the doors and turn all the lights off?"

Claire shrugs. "I could make a poster saying the party's canceled. You have glitter paint, right?"

"Obviously. It's in my craft closet right next to the scrapbooking stuff."

She graces me with a laugh and then pulls her lip between her teeth in an attempt to stop it. I don't want to think about how much I like the sound, so I bring up the first thing that's been on my mind. "Did you mean it?"

Confused, Claire looks up at me. Her bright eyes shine, and I can't tell if it's the reflection of the moon or the water we're on or if there are tears trying to fall. "What?"

"When you told Rhea you'd trade your life for hers. Did you mean it?"

This time, Claire answers without hesitation. "Yes."

"That's a pretty serious thing to say."

"You don't believe me." She surmises, moving her hair off her shoulder and reaching across the table for her glass.

"It's just a big claim to make." I shrug. "Most people don't actually think in terms of the real context when someone says *I'd die for you*."

"No." Claire shrugs, taking a sip of her bourbon. Her cheeks are flushed, and I know she's got to be starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. "If you'd asked me that first night we met if I'd die for her, I may not have understood how seriously you meant it and I would have said yes. But I still think that's too easy. I don't want someone to die for me."

"No?" I muse, intrigued and grateful for the distraction she's giving me right now so that I can offer my sister the chance to simmer down before I seek her out again.

Claire shakes her head, pressing her lips together while considering her next words. "This may come across a little harsh, so give me some grace?"

She leans forward just a little, and the smell of my bourbon mixes with the scent of her perfume, creating an intoxicating aroma. It takes me a moment to realize she's waiting for an answer, so once I do, I just nod. "I told you I tried to kill myself. I understand the desperation it takes to get to that point… the hopelessness. So don't misunderstand me when I say that once you get past the decision and the action of it, death is easy. It's living that fucking hurts." She laughs. "So maybe it's just the orphan in me speaking, but I don't want love from anyone whose sole claim is that they'd die for me. I want love from people who will live for me."

I'm trying to think of a worthy response when she stands and offers me a small smile. "And yes, Remy, I would live for her, too."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

It took every ounce of restraint I have to walk past Rhea’s room without at least trying to check on her. But I was right when I told Remy that she needs time, so I went to my room and changed out of the ridiculous dress I wore to try and cover the hurt. I lay on my bed, staring at the fan turning slow circles on the ceiling until eventually sleep took hold.

I find the courage to knock on Rhea’s door the next morning, knowing I’m risking her wrath, but get no answer so I take my time getting ready. I’ll be skipping breakfast—I don’t want to risk Elaine slipping poison in my pancakes—but I know I can’t hide in my room. I wouldn’t even if I could. It’s my turn to be strong. I remind myself of that as I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

I’ve kept my light blonde hair shoulder length since I moved to Darrington, but it’s been months since I had a trim, and my locks are getting out of control. But that’s not the reason I don’t recognize myself—I’ve already prepared my mask for later, dressed in invisible armor.

I missed the funeral, and as much as I don’t want to attend a service for a man who caused so much misery in the lives of those who loved him, I won’t abandon Rhea tonight. It would take a force of nature or an act of God to keep me from being by her side.

By the time I’m ready to go downstairs and face everyone, I’ve covered my scars—both the physical and the mental. My shirt is loose enough to skim over the fresh bandage I threw on this morning, and when I sweep my

hair over my shoulder just right, you can't even see the little scar on the top of my right breast.

When I make it to the kitchen, Elaine is sitting at the counter alone, looking at something in her hand. Remy and Rhea are nowhere to be found, and the thought of being alone with the woman I am pretty sure wants me dead or at least gone is nauseating in itself. I turn, preparing to slink away before she ever even realizes I'm there. But her voice saying my name freezes me in place, and I pause.

No slipping away now.

"Good morning." I turn back to face her with a magnanimous smile that probably looks every bit as fake as it feels.

"How are you feeling?" Her eyes flit over me, the mock concern making my stomach twist.

"Great." Eager to change the topic, I look around the kitchen pointedly. "Where's Rhea? And Remy?"

"We needed olives for the charcuterie board." Elaine gestures to a tray covered in crackers. "For tonight."

I glance at the makings of the board, unsure why she's prepping it so early and equally unsure why Remy and Rhea had to go themselves. It's weird. I guess I just hadn't pictured Remy as the type to do his own shopping—why would he when Elaine has to prep his meals anyway? It's even stranger when I consider the way we all left each other last night. It's a pretty big leap from having your world shattered by the weight of your family's secrets to making a run for something as insignificant as olives.

"Hmm." I attempt a smile, but it fails. Elaine eyes me intently and I get the sense that she's not actually interested in our conversation, which makes two of us.

"Well," I say, tipping my head toward the porch. "I was going to get some fresh air, so when they get back, if anybody asks about me, I'm going on a walk."

I cross the patio as quickly as my legs will allow, but before my hand ever touches the doorknob, I hear the scrape of a barstool. "Claire," Elaine says, "wait."

I dance out of her reach, offering her a smile that's just short of cordial. "It's just a walk." I assure her with a wave. "I'll be fine."

"Of course you will," she agrees too easily, letting me know she isn't actually listening to me. "I just… I wanted to talk to you."

I fix her with a quick glance, hoping she doesn't notice the way my eyes flit over her in an attempt to assess what sort of threat she poses. She doesn't have a knife or frying pan in sight, but Jovich got me with a needle in the neck. Technically, that was Mack, but the sentiment is the same. I can't trust anyone.

"Well, maybe when I get back..." I throw the door open and practically fall out of it. My cheeks heat with embarrassment at my flightiness—I'm treating the housekeeper like she is actively plotting my murder. It's probably irrational. No, it's *definitely* irrational, when you consider that I sat across from Wes last night, unflinching.

"Claire—" She tries again.

I don't let her finish whatever she wants to say, wrapping my arms around myself as I walk quickly away from her. This time, she lets me go without further incident.

I don't turn around to look over my shoulder until my toes touch the water. I let them sink into the sand, rooting me to the spot as I look back at the house to find that she's gone. I want to be relieved, but something about it is unsettling too. If she really is trying to kill me, maybe I should be keeping a closer eye on her.

Slipping my phone from my pocket, I glance at the time. 10:16.

The sun's reflection glitters over the water, not yet risen to its precipice. The wake is at four, and though I've never attended one, I am pretty confident that they don't take six hours to prepare for. It's not like it's a masquerade with lavish décor the whole town will be coming to see. I kind of thought they'd just microwave some appetizers and call it a night.

I should have known better.

Rhea doesn't half-ass anything, particularly when she wants revenge.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

As hard as I knew it would be, I found the strength to tell Rhea the rest of the story. All of it.

And now there are almost no secrets between us. I kept at bay the ones that involve innocent people, the secrets that would gain me nothing but my sister's pity. The secrets that would betray people who have already been hurt enough. When it was all said and done, she hugged me, thanked me for the truth, and smiled.

I feel like I've failed her.

But Rhea is fantastic—she's either handling this really well, or she's in denial. I'd bet every penny I have that it's the latter of the two, but it's hard to fight her as she walks through the grocery store collecting random things. I wanted to wait for Claire to wake up, but it's kind of nice to have this time alone with my sister.

"Nothing says 'this is a wake for an incredibly well-respected man' quite like roses." She smiles innocently when I raise an eyebrow, gesturing to the rows of blooms in a cooler to our right. "You're the one who said I need to play the part of doting daughter."

"Rhea…" I sigh. "I'm not asking you to pretend he was a good father. After what I told you last night—"

"Which part?" She interjects, glancing at me over her shoulder. "The part where our father whored our mother out to his business partner resulting in a half-brother who tried to have my best friend delivered into sex trafficking? Or the part where he whored *me* out to sex traffickers?"

I cringe as an older woman glances our way in apparent disgust, but judging by the way her eyes linger on the roses as she passes, I guess she didn't hear anything too bad. She likely doesn't even speak enough English to understand what Rhea said beyond maybe the word *whore*. She must just hate yellow.

Actually, now that I think about it, my father *hated* yellow. That makes me smile as Rhea grabs the last bouquet off the shelf, adding it to the three she's already tucked in the crook of her arm, and drops it into the shopping cart. She grabs some sunflowers next, then some other yellow flower I don't care to contemplate the species of, before dusting her hands together and standing back to be sure she's cleared the section of yellow flowers.

"This is the twenty first century, Ray." I say, stepping in front of her before she can dance out of the way again. "Our father telling Davos that he can take you doesn't constitute a legally binding contract. You know that, right?"

"Of course I know that." She huffs. "You know that doesn't make it any better, right?"

"You know that *nothing* will make that better." I shrug. I mean it when I say there are almost no secrets between my sister and I now—at least, none that are mine to tell. There are still things that involve other people—stories that can only be told by the main character.

I gave her a bit of time to stew on all the information I'd dumped on her, and then after Claire left, I went and convinced Rhea to hear me out. She knows everything I do about the people in our lives, she knows exactly what I do for Davos and the operation, and she knows that I have developed a taste for taking justice into my own hands. I left Claire's part out of it when I told her about Giante, but she took that scarily well. You'd think her brother being a murderer would be the hard part to swallow, but her biggest hang-up in all of it was our half-brother.

Neither of us slept last night—we stayed awake like we used to when we were young, and we'd talk for hours about the things we wanted to do in our lifetimes. Never would ten-year-old Remy have guessed he'd have so much blood on his hands, but I think he'd just be glad the world is safe from Jonathan Boudreaux now, relieved that I turned into the protector we never had.

"No." Rhea agrees. It takes me a moment to remember what we were even talking about. "But I have a plan to take the sting out a little."

“By filling my house with the color he despised?”

“Oh, Rem,” She laughs, nudging me in the arm. “You confessed that our father was a murderer, and you think my earthly revenge is just to buy some flowers? You truly underestimate the depths of pettiness I ascribe to.”

“Well, I am looking forward to finding out.”

When Rhea smiles, it looks genuine. It falters a moment as she grabs a box off the shelf and peers down at it, presumably intrigued by the ingredients label of whatever she’s got. I turn back to scan the aisles, trying to figure out which one may have olives, before Rhea’s hesitant voice draws me back.

This time, when I face her, she is somber. “I’m sorry for how I treated you guys.”

I blink, unsure of what exactly she’s talking about. We discussed everything last night and landed in a good place, so her sudden apology seems out of left field. “It’s okay,” I tell her. “We kept secrets from you. I think you were justified to be a little upset.”

“I’m not talking about last night.” She flips her hand through the air like she can just push that thought right out of existence. “I mean, I’m sorry for telling you to stay away from her when she makes you happy.”

Her words give me a long pause. I’m not sure what to say, aware that there are multiple ways right now that I could ruin things. When she snaps her fingers in front of my face, I decide I can’t think of a delicate way to go about this. “She *makes me happy*?”

“Yes,” Rhea nods. “And I get it. I told you years ago when I first met her that she was pretty awesome. I don’t blame you for wanting to have something good in all of this… ugliness.” She sighs, and I can tell that’s not the word she wanted to use, but it’s all she could come up with. “I don’t blame you for trying to hold onto a little light in all this darkness, Rem.”

I consider opening my mouth again to tell her that it’s not as deep as she seems to believe, but she’s content to let the matter rest. If we can leave it at that without me potentially having to butcher my reasons for being drawn to her best friend, all the better. I don’t know how to convey to my sister that I’m drawn to Claire, that I have been from the first moment I saw her, but that it’s not because I think she can save me or *make me happy.* I decide to keep my mouth shut, and I do… until Rhea grabs a balloon and wraps it around the shopping cart handle.

She's grinning when I glance at her. I'd ask if she knows what that text on it means, but there's no way she doesn't. She grew up hearing Spanish spoken on the daily, and though she may not have cause to use it often, I don't believe for a second that she's forgotten it.

"What?" She giggles, feigning innocence. "It's just a balloon."

"Yeah," I agree. "And it's just a party."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I take my time walking along the shore, letting the sand squish between my toes, feeling the sun on my skin, breathing in the salty sea. I didn't even realize how tense I still felt until I've soaked in the peace the water brings me and felt it all ease like a rope being unknotted.

I'd change into a bathing suit and go for a swim, but I don't want to have to wash my hair again before Remy's home is filled with rich criminals and murderers in sleek suits. It's weird that the thought doesn't make me squirm any more than the usual amount given my dislike for social gatherings, but I guess I've joined the club. It's less intimidating, I suppose, to be around people who are capable of wicked things when I am capable of wicked things too. I didn't know it until Remy showed me, but I'm grateful for it.

When I get back to the house, Rhea is sitting at the counter with her back to me, adjusting a floral arrangement. I don't immediately notice Remy, but I can feel his eyes on me as I join his sister at the island. "Morning."

My voice shakes a little with the fear that she's still holding onto frustration with me. She asked me last night if I orchestrated our friendship like some kind of puppet master, and while I know she's hurting, I have to admit that her distrust cuts deeper than Mack's blade did.

When Rhea turns to face me, she slides off the barstool so fast I think it's about to tip out from under her. But it doesn't, and she must not be suspicious of me anymore either, because she throws her arms around me and pulls me close.

“Claire,” She sighs. I hear her voice wobble just a little on my name, and it gives me the presence of mind to wrap my arms around her and return the hug. “I owe you a lot of apologies.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” I assure her. I betrayed her, in a sense, even when I thought it was the best thing for her. Remy asked me not to tell her when someone shot at me outside of their house, and he trusted me with information that I wasn’t supposed to pass along to his sister. She would be right to be mad at me, but she only squeezes me tighter for a second before letting go.

“We have a lot to talk about when I finish this.” She says it quietly enough that I know it’s meant for me alone, and I’m not sure whether that should make me as nervous as it does or if I’m just strung too tightly right now.

I only nod in response and then slip my hands in the back pockets of my shorts, staring at the counter that’s covered in vases. I don’t know how I didn’t realize it before, because there’s quite literally nothing but flowers covering the entire kitchen island. Given that I’ve never seen a kitchen so large, it’s actually fairly impressive.

“Umm,” I can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of my chest. It feels like we’re in a cheesy romance movie where someone’s desperately trying to win Rhea’s affection. “What’s with the flowers?”

“It’s a wake. You know, cause of the whole ‘dead dad’ thing.” Rhea says, like she’s just reminding me in case I’ve forgotten the whole reason we came to this country in the first place. “People love flowers at funerals. Because what better way to help someone get over the death of someone they cared for than by making them watch flowers wither into nothing?”

She laughs, but it sends a chill down my spine. I fail to suppress the shudder, and she doesn’t bother trying to hide her smirk. “Relax, Claire. I’m not fixating.”

“Fixating, dissociating… whatever you’re doing, I’m not sure it’s healthy.”

“Well, that’s rich coming from you.” She shakes her head, and when I don’t press her on what that’s supposed to mean, she relents with a sigh. “This is just me grieving. I happen to love yellow, so I got a little carried away.”

I narrow my eyes on her a little, trying to figure out what she’s not saying. I do know she likes yellow, but in all the years we’ve lived together,

I’ve never seen her buy flowers.

“Our father hated the color yellow,” Remy says, stepping into the kitchen and slipping his phone into the front pocket of his pants. He looks good, dressed down like this. It’s a step down from the glory of his perfectly tailored suits, and I enjoy him with minimal clothing, but something about the simple black tee he’s wearing like a second skin makes me feel like I’m about to swallow my tongue.

“Hate is a strong word.” Rhea shrugs. “But it’s true. And it’s also how I feel about him.” She turns to Remy suddenly, dropping the yellow ribbon she was fluffing around one of the vases. “You don’t think it’s too late to cremate him with some of these?”

My mouth falls open in shock, but Remy only laughs. “Considering they took his body to the crematorium after the funeral, I’m going to go with yes.”

“Hmm.” Rhea sighs dramatically, lifting the scissors to trim the ribbon. “Shame.”

“it’s not like the flowers would be yellow after they were burnt anyway.” Remy laughs. “If you really want to stick it to him, you could just plant a garden of yellow flowers and scatter his remains in them so that he *becomes* yellow.”

“I’m not touching his remains.” Rhea drops the scissors with a loud clatter and plants her hands on her hips.

“They’ll be in an urn,” Remy says, waving her worry away with a dismissive flip of his hand.

“No,” she says, looking at me like she’s seeking back up. “I’m not touching his urn either. Dump him in the ocean if you don’t want him.”

“I’m not dumping him in the ocean.” Remy sounds as aghast by the idea as I feel about it. “You think I want bits of him floating in the water so that every time I go for a swim, I have to think about him?”

“Well, I don’t want him!” Rhea snaps.

“Fine.” Remy shrugs. “We’ll put him on the mantle back home.”

Rhea considers that a moment, and then she breaks into a grin. “I was thinking of doing a little bit of maintenance there, you know? Fresh paint inside and out.”

“Let me guess,” I glance around like I’m trying really hard to think of what color she would possibly want to paint her family home. “Are you, by chance, thinking yellow?”

“Why, Claire!” Rhea teases. “It’s like you know me.”

“Just a little,” I laugh.

It’s mad, what we’re doing. Sitting here acting like the three of us haven’t had the most fucked up week ever. My head is still spinning with all of it. Literally spinning.

A wave of dizziness washes over me, so I grip the counter in front of me to keep from getting a little too faint. It doesn’t go unnoticed… not by Rhea, whose lips pull down in concern, not by Remy who moves behind me like he means to catch me if I fall, and not by Elaine, who walks back into the kitchen at that exact moment and takes one look at me before commanding me to sit.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Claire gets control of herself before she can fall, but I'm already catching her under the arm so that I can ensure she stays standing upright. Elaine tells her to sit, but sitting on a barstool while she's feeling faint is probably not the best idea, so I guide her to the dining room and pull a chair out for her.

"I'm fine." She says, attempting to wave me off. The kitchen is close enough that Rhea only has to poke her head around the corner to see her, but she's standing directly over my shoulder. "Just… tired."

Something about the way she says the word makes me think she isn't being completely honest. I just don't know if she's lying to us or to herself. "It's been quite the week." Elaine says, shaking her head. "Should I make a fresh pot of coffee?"

"No!" Claire says quickly. Her intensity doesn't go unnoticed, but none of us say anything as her cheeks turn pink and she seems to search for the right words. "I think I'm just a little dehydrated. After all that we drank last night and then walking on the beach this morning…"

Elaine makes a move, presumably to get her a drink, but stops when Claire asks me to get her a bottle of water. She's definitely trying to dismiss me, and she doesn't even bother looking at me as she does. It's strange after everything last night. When she threw me up against the wall to tell me to go after Wes, I'd thought there was a spark between us just waiting to be rekindled. Now she won't even look at me.

I push to stand and get her a bottle of water from the fridge, suddenly feeling chastised. It's not the fact that she doesn't want me near that bothers me—it's the way she's treating me like an errand boy in my own house. This time, I avoid her gaze when I pass her the water, and I don't give her an answer when she says, 'thank you'.

If Claire wants space from me, she will get it. I have business to attend to anyway. Elaine and Rhea can finish getting everything prepped for tonight, for the morbid party I never wanted to attend, much less host. It feels wrong to parade my father's business associates, his victims, and his equally predatory friends through my house while we all pretend like there's a single person left on this Earth who feels sad that he's gone.

I've just slipped my phone from my pocket when it rings.

Dimitri.

Sometimes I swear he's in tune with me so much that I have to wonder whether he watches me in my own home for the hell of it. "Are you secretly obsessed with me?" I tease, trying not to let any of my disappointment over Claire's disinterest in me bleed into my tone. It doesn't sound as light as I want it to, but it serves the purpose all the same. I know it's not me he's obsessed with—I caught him stealing glances at Rhea all throughout dinner last night. I'm hoping that he never feels the need to bring it up. The girls will be back in the states soon, and then both of our problems will be solved.

Dimitri snorts. "I think you're trying to make me be." He says. "You've ignored me all morning."

"I was busy."

"Yeah, sure," he laughs. "I thought you may want to know; I have a friend in Amsterdam."

"Good for you." I say. "But you should know, if you have to pay for their services, they aren't a friend."

It's a bad joke. I cringe as soon as I speak the words, knowing how quickly he can turn brooding and sulky when I get too close to sensitive subjects. "Noted." His voice is dry, but not angry. I'm grateful for that as he continues. "Davos hopped on his private jet last night about midnight."

"Midnight his time or midnight our time?" I'm not sure it matters, and I don't feel like doing the math anyway.

"She just said midnight. You know he doesn't come out of hiding all that often."

“No,” I agree, “he doesn’t.”

“I assume we’ll be seeing him tonight. I’ve taken the liberty of increasing the security both around the perimeter and in the fold.”

Rhea’s laugh floats down the hall to where I’m standing in the shadows, trying to assess the situation that will be unfolding in a matter of hours. Dimitri did the right thing in increasing security—that’s exactly what I was calling him for. I kept Wes alive after I killed his little cronies for this very reason. I had him sit very visibly in the front of the church so that his presence would draw the attention of Davos’ associates and enemies alike. I’m not sure how common knowledge it is that he is Davos’ son—I didn’t know that, and I like to think I know my enemies well since I’ve kept them closer than my own family for the last three years.

Davos knows where we are—not that he had any doubts when I called him and begged for him to give me the chance to purchase a woman I hadn’t even had sex with yet. I knew he was coming, but I didn’t know when. This wake is the perfect cover for him. And Wes is the perfect cover for me.

“Double what we have.” I tell him. “I want my house crawling with men on my own payroll.”

There’s a moment of hesitation, and then he says, “You got it.”

“How’s our patient?” I ask, before he can try to rationalize with me again on all the reasons why we shouldn’t let Wes out to play.

“Fine.” Dimitri laughs. “But you knew that. You’ve been texting him all day.”

“You’ve been with him all day?” I counter. “That’s sweet.”

Dimitri laughs, pauses, and then laughs harder. “Michael says ‘fuck you’.”

“I don’t think Michael said anything given that he told me he’s not allowed to speak for a few weeks while his vocal cords heal but tell him I’ll have to take a raincheck. I’ve already got my sights set on someone else.”

Dimitri snorts a laugh, and then the ease of the past minute fades as he sighs. “So, you want me to bring him up about four?”

“No.” I shake my head, fully aware he can’t see me. “I want him there the least amount of time possible…. Minimize the damage of his presence.”

“Sure,” Dimitri agrees, though he doesn’t sound entirely convinced. I’m about to hang up when my tongue moves of its own volition.

“Dimitri?”

“Yes, Boudreaux?” I appreciate the casual comfort we’ve slipped into following Jovich’s death. Dimitri took a back seat when my father sent Jovich to poke around in my business and things had grown a touch too formal. Laughing with him, teasing and cajoling and not being called ‘boss’ offers me a little levity.

“If Wes so much as lifts a finger to Claire or Rhea, cut it off.”

I almost expect him to protest or ask whether I mean to take him out back as opposed to switching open his blade in the middle of the wake, but somehow, I think he delights in the idea. He confirms as much when he speaks again.

“Gladly.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I really do think I’m dehydrated. I’ve been avoiding anything Elaine has touched since I got back from the hospital, and the prosecco I indulged in last night surely didn’t help matters. But Rhea has already assured me that I need to replenish because we will not be sober for much longer, so I drink the entire water and then stand to grab another.

Rhea joins me, taking one for herself, before pulling me toward the stairs.

“Don’t you need help?” I gesture toward the counter and all the flowers, but she just laughs.

“No. We can place them when Elaine starts getting the food ready.”

I don’t care to argue the point, and I’m eager to know what shift happened between her and her brother that resulted in this bright and cheery attitude. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think Remy somehow erased her memory of our conversation last night. I wouldn’t put it past him to know of some kind of pill or elixir that would help. Maybe I should ask about that.

But once we are safely shut in her room, it’s obvious that Rhea has not mysteriously had all of her memories wiped clean. Part of me is a little sad about that, but I’m mostly just relieved that I don’t have to go through telling her all of it again.

“Claire…” She heaves a breath, like she’s filling her lungs to scream. I sit on the edge of her bed, waiting for whatever is on her mind to tumble out of her mouth the way she tends to do. “I’m so sorry.”

I blink, waiting for the rest of whatever she's going to say. When she's quiet, I realize she's chewing on her lip and watching me expectantly. Nervous is a weird look on her.

"Oh." I say. "I forgive you?"

It comes out like a question, which breaks the dam and Rhea throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around me. "I'm sorry my family sucks, I'm sorry about what happened to you, I'm sorry I even asked you if you knew all of this before you met me. It was such a stupid thing to say, and I knew it wasn't true, but I asked it anyway and I don't know why but I hate that I did that to you!"

Her words tumble so quickly that I'm not sure I catch them all until she stops talking and my brain gets a chance to catch up. "I'm not sorry that I met you, Rhea. You're my only family—the most important person in my life. I'm sorry that your family sucks, too. Honestly, I think your dad being an awful monster makes me feel better about not having parents."

That gets a laugh out of her, and when Rhea pulls away, she wipes a tear from her cheek. "As far as being sorry for what happened to me," I pause, unsure what exactly we're talking about. "None of anything bad that has ever happened to me has been your fault."

"Oh, come on." She sobs a little but regains her composure quickly. "If I hadn't begged you to come to Costa Rica with me, you never would have ended up in that situation."

It's not entirely true. I'm sure the circumstances may have been different, but if her father promised her to Davos, I have a feeling that they would have come for her eventually. And I would have been in the way, so I'd have died or ended up in the same circumstances. At least this way I made a tentative connection to her brother that was enough for him to come seek me out.

"If you hadn't brought me here, then when they did come for us, Remy would have been on the other side of the world completely unprepared. They would have killed me or taken me, and I wouldn't have been saved because nobody would even realize I was missing."

It's a sad reality, and speaking it aloud makes me feel like a ghost in the shell. I suppose our landlord would eventually wonder why the rent wasn't being paid, but they'd surely attempt to get in touch with Rhea before me. When I failed to show up to the classes I've already enrolled in for fall, my professors may eventually wonder what happened to me. Mama would

probably assume I never came back after this past summer because I'd grown out of my college comforts, but she too would think first of Rhea.

It doesn't make me feel any less that I've tethered myself so completely to my best friend—I think I did that to survive—but it does make me feel like I've lost something. A terrifying realization flits through me as I realize that when we get back to school, I need to do more than just pick a major. I need to make connections that don't exist solely because of Rhea.

"And as far as you asking if I secretly stalked you to try and become your friend?" I laugh. "It was pure coincidence that we ended up as roommates."

"And pure coincidence that we're both fucked up enough to click."

Her eyes widen like she didn't mean to say that out loud, but when I bust out laughing, she quickly joins in. "That," I say when my laughter calms enough for me to speak, "may have been fate more than coincidence."

She grins, but I don't think she understands the sincerity with which I said it. I wouldn't have survived this long if it wasn't for her, and I'm starting to think that there's some higher power that wants me to survive longer… even if it's only to watch as they think of new ways to torture me.

"You're right," she nods. "You're stronger than me. I don't know if I'd have survived what you did."

I want to laugh because that sentiment is ridiculous. Rhea is everything I'm not—strong, confident, self-assured, poised. She would have not only navigated captivity with grace, I bet she'd have found a way out on her own. I'm grateful that I wasn't taken, but also if I'm honest, I feel embarrassed that her brother had to come save me… especially since I was running from him in the first place.

But I don't want to argue semantics with her, and I don't want to think about it anymore. "Well, I just pray we never find out."

Rhea nods, pulling her lower lip between her teeth as she contemplates something. "You know Wes will be there tonight, right?"

His name ignites something in me. I'm not sure what heartburn feels like, but that may be this. "I didn't," I admit, "but I am not surprised." I still don't know what all Remy revealed to her—if he told her anything else at all. She seems to sense as much because she sucks in a breath.

"Remy told me everything."

I only blink at her while my brain tries to process what the word 'everything' means in this context. "Everything?"

“About Wes, and that Eric guy, and…” She shakes her head. “Just everything. I know he’s keeping Wes in the guest house so that he can use him for information. I kind of wish he’d just bury him on the beach and never breathe his name again.” Her eyes go wide again as she presses a hand to her mouth. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

Unfazed, I shrug. I do realize how detached I am from death, but I’m honestly more worried about how detached from it Rhea is. Or rather, I’m more worried that she isn’t horrified to know her best friend is a killer. I decide to test the waters. “He deserves it.”

“Seriously,” she grumbles. “Some people just don’t deserve to live.”

Interestingly enough, that’s just one more thing we agree upon. The relief that rushes through me comes on so fast I think I may collapse under it. Having the air cleared and all of our secrets out in the open feels like taking my first breath after drowning.

“There’s one more thing,” Rhea says slowly, her eyes searching my face. “I’m sorry for treating you like a child.” I start to open my mouth because I don’t even know what that means, but she rushes on. “You are an adult, Claire. And a freaking badass. If you want to fuck around with my brother, then go for it.”

Her words stun me to silence. I want to object that I have no interest in fucking around with her brother, but that would be a damn lie and after we just eliminated every one of those between us, I’m not going to put it out there. “Sorry,” she lifts a finger, “let me clarify.”

I watch her with nervous energy coiling in my stomach. “As long as you’re careful with your heart, you can fuck around with whoever you want, including my brother… Remy.”

When I laugh, Rhea looks confused. She laughs too, after a minute, and then a realization settles around her. “He didn’t tell you, did he?”

My stomach tightens further at the thought of what Remy may have kept from me. In that context, it sounds horrific. We were stupid and threw ourselves at one another so quickly that we didn’t discuss protection. Does he have some sort of disease? Maybe a girlfriend or a secret wife who’s been vacationing in Paris this past week?

I think Rhea can hear my heart about to beat out of my chest, because she fixes me with a look of pity. “It’s nothing crazy.”

“Okay?” I prompt, waiting for her to put me out of my misery.

When she finally speaks, I have to wonder how far gone she is that she doesn't think what she reveals is crazy. Maybe I really *am* the saner between the two of us.

"Wes is our half-brother."

***

It takes a fair bit of assurance from Rhea saying that she believes her brother, who apparently believes Wes' stupid ass, and then I start to believe it. They do share some similar features, the three of them. The brothers have the same dark hair and Wes' green eyes glitter with malice the way Rhea's emerald takes over when she's feeling mischievous.

"So maybe that's why he's keeping Wes alive." I say.

"Doubtful." Rhea chuckles. "Trust me, blood means nothing if you're a shitty person, which he is."

"Well," I shrug, "I wouldn't believe it until he can prove it. Wes is clearly manipulative."

"Yes," she agrees. "But you're going to out-manipulate him tonight." I lift an eyebrow in question, and Rhea grins, scrambling to her feet. "You did such a good job yesterday showing him how much you aren't broken from him. I saw the way he looked at you the night Ryan introduced you, and I saw the way he looked at you last night at dinner. He fucking wants you, Claire. I think you should give him a glimpse of what he will never have."

I'm starting to shake my head when she throws a dress at me. I hold it up to inspect it, but it's hard to get a sense of what it would look like when it's stretched over my body. "I'm not telling you to tie him up and perform a strip tease or anything." She shrugs. "'Though if you want to torture him that's not a bad idea."

When I don't agree, she rolls her eyes. "I'm just saying, you're handling all of this so well. If you don't know what happened, you'd never know. You know?"

"I *don't* know." I squint at her. "What are you saying?"

"Just that you are a badass." She shrugs. "Lean into it."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Honestly, I don’t know if it’s the ‘badass’ I’m leaning into or the crazy, but I’m leaning into something as I walk quickly across the lawn, trying not to run but also trying to walk with every bit of the purpose that’s burning inside of me. The knife I pilfered from the kitchen when Elaine blissfully went to answer the front door is sheathed and tucked blade down against my hip. It pokes out from the bottom of my dress every few strides, so I just pull the fabric taut and carry on.

I don’t know if Remy keeps his evil half brother attended twenty-four seven, so I’m just hoping I can convince Dimitri to let me in. My other option was to wait and then find the guest-house key tonight while everyone sleeps, but I don’t want to lose my opportunity in case something goes wrong, and he ends up getting shot. Rhea assured me the security will be extensive and they won’t let Wes get away, but if he tries, he could end up dead and then I’d never get the opportunity to do this.

It doesn’t take long for the door to open after I knock. Dimitri opens it and looks down at me, confused. His tie is loose around his neck, the top button of his shirt not yet fastened. I take note of the gun holstered on his hip and feel a little bit better about what I’m about to do. “Hi?” His voice doesn’t hide his confusion, and the smile I fix him with doesn’t seem to help matters either.

I hear the TV in the background and realize he has most definitely been staying here day in and day out to keep watch over Wes. I wonder if he sleeps on the bed Remy and I fucked on. “Dimitri,” I bat my eyelashes.

“Do you… need something?”

That’s good. He wants to help. I nod slowly before looking up at him from under my eyelashes. I bite my lip too, for good measure. It feels ridiculous—I’ve never fancied myself to be an actress, but he doesn’t look at me with suspicion so I must not be obvious in my manipulation.

“Yes.” My voice is small. That part, I’m not faking. That comes all on its own. “I want closure.”

He knows what I’m asking for without me needing to elaborate, and I’m grateful that Jovich’s replacement is at least smart. And compassionate, apparently, because he doesn’t immediately shoot me down. “I… can’t let you in here.”

“I just really want to look in his eyes and ask him why he did what he did.” I bite my lip again because I’m afraid he’ll see right through me.

He hesitates, though for a moment I think his eyes go watery. “Remy would be furious if he knew I let you in.”

“Remy doesn’t have to know,” I say. “I won’t tell him.”

Dimitri looks like he wants to help me, but he’s conflicted. His loyalty is nice. I wonder if it would end at serving me up to the darkness to protect the ones he’s pledged that loyalty to. “I’m supposed to keep you safe.”

This is the most I’ve talked to him, so hearing him claim he’s supposed to protect me is kind of disconcerting, but I choose not to focus on that. “He’s tied up, right?” I shrug. “And you have a gun. He can’t hurt me.”

I see him working through the thought a moment before he opens the door wide enough for me to come in. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up about closure. Men like him don’t have good reasons for doing what they do. They just like to pluck the petals off flowers before they stomp on what remains.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat and nod my understanding. I know the way to the cellar—Remy took me here just a few days ago. I killed a man who made me try to kill myself in that very same space. I remember every detail of that night—I relive it every time I start to fall asleep. I think I could walk down there with my eyes closed, but I wait for Dimitri to lead me anyway.

My heart hammers harder with each step I take; I consider running in the opposite direction and hiding in my room ‘til after the wake ends, but I bet he hears my voice. He might even smell my perfume. It was a bold move,

coming here all dressed for the wake, but by the time I committed to this idea, I wasn’t about to change back into something less formal.

When we step into the basement room, it's not what I expected. Last time I was here, Wes was tied to a chair in the center of the room with his hands bound behind his back and duct tape over his mouth. Dimitri didn't lie when he said that Wes was tied up, but instead of being bound to a chair, his wrists are secured tightly to a bedpost. It doesn't look comfortable, but it does look better for sleeping than the chair, and Wes is taking full advantage. His head lolls to one side, his eyes closed.

And he is fucking *snoring*.

I’m annoyed by his audacity to get some rest, and I think Dimitri recognizes it because he shrugs. “Fucker tipped the chair and busted out of his restraints. This was Plan B.”

A brief flicker of satisfaction blooms inside of me as I recognize it as the bed that Remy laid me over when we had passionate, hot, and not quiet sex above Wes’ head. Definitely better him than Dimitri.

“You keep your distance,” Dimitri warns. “I’ll wake him for you.”

“That won't be necessary.” I smile, drawing up to Wes’ side. He’s a heavy sleeper, apparently. If I couldn't clearly see his wrists bound with thick black cable ties, I would have thought he was feigning sleep in an attempt to catch me off guard when I get close.

“Claire,” Dimitri warns. His voice is nervous, like he is also entertaining the idea that Wes might be faking it. But I've come this far; I'm not going to stand across the room from him.

I hike the skirt of my dress up just a little in the front so that nothing is in my way as I swing my leg over Wes’s torso and sink down on his stomach until I’m straddling him. Dimitri blows out a breath, but I'm not sure if it's because he’s seeing the knife tucked into my thigh-highs, or because he thinks I'm about to do something devious.

My weight on his stomach is enough to stir him from the deeper stages of sleep, but his eyes don't open until I wrap both hands around his neck and apply just the slightest bit of pressure.

When his eyes fly open, they're clouded by confusion as he looks for the source of what's restricting his air supply and perhaps realizes it wasn't only in his dream. The confusion doesn't last long and neither does the fear that flicks across his green eyes. There is tape over his mouth; If I pinch his nose shut right now, how long would it take until his heart quits beating?

I lean into him and blow across the tape, though I doubt the warmth of my breath is enough to warm the tape up much. I also don't care if it hurts, so I dig a nail under the corner under his lip and yank the strip free all at once. He grunts in pain, bracing against the bed as he tries to contain his discomfort. I can’t help but laugh that a little bit of duct tape makes him cry out and react like he’s been lashed. “What’s the matter, baby?” I taunt. “You don't like it rough?”

His jaw twitches as he attempts to ease some of the stinging on his face—the skin is red where I just exposed it to air. “No, I do,” he says. “I just prefer to be on top.”

I’m sure you do.

“Worried about your fragile manhood?”

“My manhood is just fine, Claire. Scoot a little further south and you'll find out for yourself.”

I grace him with a laugh for that. “Maybe another day. I think your brother plans to keep you around for a bit, so we have plenty of time to play.”

His eyes flare at that, and I don’t know if it’s the promise of fun to be had or his indignation at the thought of playing captive any longer. “You gonna let him watch?” He tips his chin toward Dimitri. “I know you like to have an audience.”

“Do you?” I ask quietly.

“I know you were putting on a performance for me after you killed that other guy, baby. I heard you moaning, screaming all the way from down here. You sound like you enjoyed yourself but how genuine was it? I know that I could make you scream a hell of a lot louder than that.” He laughs, bobbing me up and down along his chest. “Hell, I already did.”

“You're right,” I whisper the words over his lips. If he leans forward just a little, his lips would brush mine. He could snare them between his teeth, and I'd have to burn them off to rid myself of his touch there. But he doesn't move, probably due in part to the blade I slip out of its sheath. It's covered in cheetah print, and I assume Elaine shopped for it, but it has a wicked sharp edge, the tip of which I press into the space between his collarbones.

Wes’ breath comes faster.

“I could give you a rematch. Dimitri could be the judge, deciding who screams loudest—me when I come on Remy’s cock, or you when I drive this blade into you.”

A smile curves his lips, and he flicks a tongue out, presumably to soothe away the stinging on them. Blood is trickling in the middle of his bottom one, and it blooms anew when his tongue is back in his mouth. “Where was this Claire the night we met, hmm? We could have had so much fun together. We still can…”

“This *is* pretty fun,” I admit, drawing the blade ever so gently across his skin. It bites into him just a little, leaving a thin line of blood to well there. Wes bucks a little, his shoulders arching back and his hands coiling into fists. He grunts through the pain until he controls it, and then he tamps it down in favor of a smile.

“I knew you had it in you. From the moment I followed you into that bathroom, I could sense your sickness.”

That gives me pause. I relent enough to give him the space to tell me more. “My sickness?”

Wes attempts a shrug and then winces when it pulls on the zip ties. “That’s just what I call it, not a clinical diagnosis. It’s different for everyone who has it, but like recognizes like. Most people do have it, these days. A sign of the times.”

He hasn’t explained what *it* is, but that’s not the only thing I need clarification on. “You're the one who came in the bathroom that night?”

“Yep,” he says, popping the ‘p’. “I was really considering pinning you up against the wall and seeing just how far you'd let me go… a stranger in the dark. I bet you would have let me go all the way, wouldn’t you? But I was there for Rhea, and even though I was pretty sure you wouldn’t stop me from fucking you in a bar bathroom like the whore you are, I also couldn’t risk you running to your little friend and ruining the night. Mack did that all on his own when he couldn't keep his hands to himself and grabbed a handful of some other man’s pussy. He sent you that drink to fuck with you because he thought you were Rhea. Stupid fuck.” He laughs. “I'm really not mad that he's dead. He brought me so much more stress than joy and this has been a nice vacation. Bed’s comfortable, smells like you… fucking heaven.”

“You sure?” I taunt, flipping the blade so that the edge is parallel with his neck, situated right under his Adam's apple, which bobs when he swallows nervously. It's an interesting contrast to the casual way he speaks, which is fitting considering I'm also pretending to be far less disturbed than I am. “It should smell like Remy considering he pulled out of me and spilled his cum

all over this mattress.” The bed had sheets and a duvet on it, of course, but I’m not going to mention it. I bite my lip in an attempt to keep back the giggle threatening to bubble out of my throat at the look of disgust on his face. “Seems your brothers cum smells like heaven to you, Wes. And you think *I’m* sick.”

I lift the blade, letting the faint light catch on the silver and then dig the tip into his chest, just above his pecs, and watch the blood glitter too. Wes grunts, but he gets hold of himself quickly. Apparently, he is used to pain to some extent. Maybe he *doesn't* just dish it out. “It’s not too late, Claire.” His mouth cocks into a grin. “You could cut these ties and we could run away together. I could make every one of your kinky fantasies come true. I could take care of you.”

I tip my head to the side, considering it. “And we would live happily ever after?”

“If that's what you want. You want the white picket fence and the two children and a golden retriever? I could get you that and so much more. You're letting your crazy out, baby, and doesn't it feel *so fucking good*?”

I laugh a little, dragging the blade up his arm to slide the tip between his flesh and the cable that is immobilizing him. When I free the first one, his eyes go wide with surprise, but it quickly turns to hunger. Wes takes it as a sign that he’s appealing to me and decides to keep going in hopes that I’ll free his other hand and together we’ll overpower Dimitri and disappear into the ether.

It would be one hell of a plot twist.

“Your sickness,” he says, his voice bordering on desperation. “You want to be loved and hated. You want to be treated like a queen in public but like a whore in private. You want passion, you want fucking *color* in a world of black and white. It’s *normal*, baby. But they don’t understand you.”

“And you do?”

“Yes,” he laughs. “I understand you because I *am* you, Claire. I see your abandonment issues, your want to be loved, and I raise you a mommy who abandoned me and a daddy who fucking hates me. Better no parents than the kind who make it their life mission to fuck you up.”

“Jonathan Boudreaux sold his daughter to your father. I’d hardly say he cared about her.”

“Just because he cared about himself more doesn't mean he didn't care for her. And our whore mother at least acknowledged their existence. What did

I ever get from her? She sat across from my father during all of their parties and never once did she ask about me… her first born.” He scoffs. “Neither of us have that. We're both caged birds that the world turned away from, but you have a chance to unlock my cage and see what we could create together.”

“Wes,” I mutter. “It's so soon to be proposing marriage, children.”

“You think Boudreaux would give all that to you?” He laughs, jostling me along his chest. I hunch over him further until we share the same air.

“You think I can’t take it for myself?” My laughter joins with his, but it’s short-lived.

“You don’t know how. But I could teach you.”

“I could kill you right now.” I counter, perfectly calm.

“Come on, Claire. You’re not a killer.”

“Oh?” I glance around at Dimitri, like he’ll give me confirmation on that point. He just looks at me—or rather, grimaces. “Didn't you hear when I killed Eric Giante? You probably don’t know who that is.” I shake my head and sigh. “He’s no one important, just a former foster father who needed to be put down like the sick dog that he is. He's the man I killed in the room right next to this one. And I mean, sure, Remy started it for me. But I delivered the final blow. The last thing he saw in this world was his victim becoming the villain.” I shrug. “Don't overestimate your worth, Wes.”

“I know my worth," he smirks, "and you can't afford to kill me. Boudreaux just wouldn't let that fly.”

I let my shoulders slump and blow out a breath. He's got a point. “You know what, Wes? You’re right. I *can’t* kill you.”

A triumphant and cocky grin spreads across his lips, but it's cut short when I drive the blade right through his still-tied hand with enough force that the tip pokes through the other side. I fight a slight feeling of wooziness as I cant my head to the side, seeing the space where the knife protrudes from his flesh and digs into the wall.

He doesn't contain his scream this time. His free hand makes a grab for me, but especially now that Remy's kitchen knife is pinning him in place, he can't get the range of motion he needs to be successful. I slide back out of his reach without losing my grip on the handle.

“Remember when you asked me if I was a nurse?”

“You fucking bitch,” he spits, kicking his feet like a child throwing a temper tantrum. He doesn’t answer my question, but I continue anyway.

“I may not be a nurse, and I am certainly no doctor, but I think if you hit a nerve just right, you’ll lose sensation in your hand. That would be a *terrible* loss for a surgeon.”

I don’t give him a minute to piece together where I'm going with this, because I jerk on the blade, dragging it through flesh and muscle until I feel it catch on bone.

Wes is writhing in pain. I don’t bother pulling the knife out as I climb off of him, allowing him to draw his knees to his stomach.

“Go ahead and cry, Wes.” I say, sliding my phone away from where it’s been pressed against my hip and navigating to the camera. I make sure to turn the flash on before snapping a few photos, and then I reach up and coat my fingers in his blood before painting it across his lips. He tries to spit at me, but I pinch his lips closed.

“I see what you mean,” I breathe, pressing my lips to his forehead for a moment, reveling in the power I've taken from him. “This really is addictive. And you?”

I swipe my thumb along the top of his cheekbone, wiping away a pained tear I don’t think he wanted to fall. “Pure fucking magic.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

An hour into the wake, Dimitri is late with my guest star.

And I think Rhea is drunk.

We were barely 5 minutes in when she sidled up beside me and handed me a shot glass full of tequila. “Take a shot every time someone says, *‘he’s in a better place’*?”

I laughed and took the one she offered me, but my sister apparently took the challenge seriously. She stumbles on her high heels and takes a moment longer than usual to withdraw from strangers’ hugs. I don't even care to know how many shots she's had, because I think that for me, every person in here has told me that my father’s in a better place. And there are a lot of people here. I've never seen so many people packed inside of my house, not even before it belonged to me. I don't even know which ones are on my payroll and which ones had a chance encounter with my father twenty years ago and just came out to feel like they were part of the charade. I can't name half of the people here, and I highly doubt my father could have either. If any of them truly knew him, they wouldn't say he was in a better place. I have my doubts about heaven, but about hell I am absolutely certain.

Dimitri has distributed the information that the security reinforcement needs, which is primarily to keep a close watch on the girls. The problem is, Claire hasn't shown up yet and I can't tell who is trying to keep tabs on my sister for me from a random fuck who sees a drunk girl ‘mourning’ the loss of her father. It's why I’m extra irritated with Dimitri for being late even

though I told him to be, and also relieved when he finally shows up thirty minutes after I told him to be there.

They don’t come straight to me, so I politely thank Mr. and Mrs. Whatever-their-name-is for coming, and then make my way to them. “You’re late.”

“Yeah,” Dimitri says drily. “I had a hard time getting the bleeding to stop.”

I don’t immediately understand what he means until I glance down and see the white bandage wrapped around Wes’ hand. I raise an eyebrow in silent question, but Dimitri shakes his head. “It wasn't me.”

“Brother,” Wes winks in greeting. He leans closer so that no one will overhear us when he asks, “Where’s your whore?”

I assume he’s talking about Claire, and while I’d love to know the answer as well, I’m not about to entertain him. “That hurt?” I tip my head toward the hand he’s favoring, pressed slightly higher against his stomach to prevent any accidental injury.

“Actually, it was so fucking erotic when she did it, I came in my pants. That’s the real reason we’re late.” His slow smirk spreads across his face at my confusion. “Oh, there she is.”

I glance up to see Claire approaching Rhea, her slender neck accentuated by a diamond necklace that my sister must have lent her. It suits her. I make a mental note to get her more of them.

Aside from the jewels glittering on her skin, she's radiant. I notice more than a few men turn their heads as she strides to my sister. Her hair is swept back in a clip and the dainty straps of a black dress that kisses her every last curve cling to her collarbone.

She looks expensive.

And dangerous.

I glance at Wes, finding him watching her like a starving man eyeballing his last meal from across the table. He looks torn between wanting to savor her and devour her, and it sends fury flooding through my veins. “Have a drink,” I tell him, pressing a rocks glass into the bandaged hand, which fails to close around the glass, sending it shattering on the floor.

Bourbon sloshes all down his pants and he growls in pain as he lifts his hand higher, like a dog with a hurt paw.

Interesting.

I can’t help but turn my attention back to Claire again. Did she really do this to him? Honestly, she looks capable of it, holding her head high with a confidence I've never seen on her. It *is* erotic. But I need to know more about what happened. Did he somehow slip free from Dimitri long enough to corner her? Or did she seek him out?

Claire must sense us watching because she glances up in our direction and smiles, though it's not the sweet and innocent look I've come to recognize from her. “I like you, Remy.” Dimitri says. “And I like the paychecks you sign. But if you cross that woman and she comes for you, I'm not getting in the way.”

“What the hell happened?” I demand, looking between the two of them.

“*Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*.”

Claire hasn't dropped my eye contact, even as Rhea pulls on her arm, attempting to drag her in a different direction. I don't know what she says to my sister, but whatever it is, she convinces Rhea to come our way. Dimitri delivers a quick slap to the back of Wes’ head, reminding him to avert his eyes, and like a scolded puppy, he does. I shoot Dimitri a look that says I expect answers later, and then turn my attention to the girls, who’ve stopped before us.

I can tell that Rhea didn’t want to come over here, and I'm fairly certain it's because this is the first time she's seeing Wes as the piece of shit that he is… and the first time she is seeing him as our brother. Her sending me away earlier is forgotten along with any animosity I felt at that moment, because all I can think about is the blood rushing to my cock and the feeble hope that it's not immediately noticeable to all of our guests. And if it is, I doubt that any of them would blame me.

She presses a shot glass into my hand, smirking knowingly. “I'm *so sorry* for your loss. This world is so cruel… at least you can take comfort in knowing that your father is in a better place.”

When I watch her red lips pull into a deeper smirk, I know Rhea has already told her the game she invented. She watches me expectantly as she lifts her shot to her lips and parts them just enough to toss the liquor back. I’m too busy watching her to take mine until she points at it, and then I knock it down quickly.

“You look…” I don’t have a word for it. I've just run through every word in Spanish *and* English that might serve a little bit of justice to how she

looks in this moment, but every single one comes up short, so I laugh instead.

“Get a room,” Wes says. “Ooh, better yet, *don't* get a room. You can fuck right here on your dining room table. Start a massive orgie. Your father would be proud.”

“Would your father be proud of *me*, Wes, if I cut your hand off entirely and mailed it right to his front door?” Claire smiles brightly.

My spine stiffens at the words, spoken in just above a whisper. I want to be horrified that this beautiful woman in front of me has the capacity to say something so violent, let alone to do it without batting an eyelash. But the way her voice lilts over the words sends need straight to my dick.

It’s wildly erotic, and I’m not sure I can even look at her right now. I also can’t take my eyes off of her.

“I’m sure Dimitri could find a blade better suited for the task.” She glances up at me, and a shy smile actually tips her lips as pink spreads across her cheeks. “Sorry about your kitchen knife.”

My… *kitchen knife*?

Dear God, this woman has some explaining to do, but I think when I get her alone, an explanation is going to be the last thing I want from her.

"Balloons at a wake?" Claire muses, switching tack so suddenly that I feel like whiplash is settling in. Next to her, Rhea grins mischievously.

"You don't like them?" She teases. "I thought they suited the occasion."

Wes and Dimitri turn their attention to the balloons Rhea grabbed at the store. Dimitri snickers, unable to hold in his amusement as I roll my eyes and Claire narrows hers, trying to figure out what she's missing.

"They say congratulations." I explain, enjoying the laugh that bursts out of her chest before she turns to giggle with my sister.

A man in a cheap suit joins our conversation, and I turn my attention to his hand on my sister’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry about your loss,” he says, his thumb reaching out to stroke her bare shoulder. She wore yellow—of course—and she’s the only one in color. She stands out even more than usual, and I can assume by the way she squints at him that she doesn’t recognize him.

“Yes,” she says, as if he asked a question. I’m not sure she realizes he didn’t.

“I’m sure he’s in a better place.”

Claire snorts with unconcealed laughter, and Rhea's eyes go wide. "Shots!" She cries, turning to find the nearest source of liquor. Dimitri moves in time to catch her under the arm as she stumbles and nearly goes careening into Claire.

When I catch his eye, words aren't necessary. But I say it anyway. "Take her upstairs. No one goes in that room besides you, me, or Claire."

Claire looks at me in mild surprise, and then steps forward to place a kiss on the top of my sister's head as Rhea reaches out for her, moaning about not wanting to go yet. Dimitri says something to her in a voice too low for me to hear, and she straightens with a smile, blows a kiss back at us, and lets him guide her out of the dining room.

I had to make a decision to prioritize my sister, given her inebriation, but now I'm alone with Wes and Claire. I can't exactly keep her away from him if I don't know who to trust to keep watch over her. And given the way she's reaching around to take a drink from the waiter who just appeared at her side, she may soon end up in the same position as Rhea. Who will take her to her room if I have to stay here with Wes?

"And then there were three." Claire grins, taking a sip from her cocktail.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I’m high on the looks both Remy and Wes are giving me, and I guarantee it puts Remy’s expensive weed to shame. I almost think this must be what it feels like to take something like ecstasy. Every part of me is alive with intoxicating possibilities. I’m not in control, and somehow that is the most glorious feeling. It doesn’t make sense, given how hard I have to fight when I’m not in control, but it’s almost like I’m in the passenger seat of my own body, acting on what feels good. Maybe something in me snapped when Rhea told me Wes was coming to dinner, or maybe nearly dying again just gave me permission to stop thinking and start doing.

Whatever happened, I love the freedom I’ve given myself.

I’d never admit it to Wes, but I’ve been strung up from the moment I walked out on him, wetness pooling between my thighs. He’s attractive enough—I was taken with him until his brother came along. But it’s not him that’s got me feeling like I’m standing at the end of a blade with a sweet abyss at my back and the desire to jump coiling low inside of me. It’s the things we said—what I *did*.

I must be as vicious a monster as him to feel like I’ve turned to putty from our earlier encounter. He likes to see people hurt, and apparently, I am no better. His groans of pain and the profane things that came out of his mouth should make me feel horror, like I’m being victimized again. Instead, I feel slippery and vicious and more alive than I think I may have ever felt before. The closest I’ve ever come to this was when I took a life and then

threw myself at Remy. That bliss faded quickly, and I'm not sure it was as sweet as this.

Maybe there's a little hope for me yet since the pleasure of getting revenge through death is eclipsed by the euphoria of making Wes hurt. As if that wasn't damning enough, the desire comes to a head when I turn my eyes back to Remy.

The way he watches me makes me feel like I'm naked… but not in a vulnerable way. It feels more like I'm the muse in an art class, and he's studying me so that he can bring me to life through the stroke of a brush. I'm spring-loaded, ready to throw myself at him again the way I did the first time. I'm not sure where our chemistry comes from—it's been hot from the moment he stopped me in his room and looked at me like a gift he hadn't asked for but had no intentions of returning. Maybe it's because he oozes sex appeal and he's just willing to take what I'm willing to give. Rhea gave me her blessing to make my own choices, and I've already decided I want him.

I bite my lip hard, needing a little pain to temper the rising tide of my libido. I should walk away from them, check on Rhea (though she's in capable hands) and take a cold shower. I'd jump in the pool and go for a swim if we weren't in the middle of a wake.

"Wes," I say, breaking the silence between us. "You alright? You look a bit pale."

"Haven't been sleeping well." Wes says pointedly. I feel Remy shift and wonder if he's uncomfortable with me talking to Wes or just confused. I also wonder if he has a gun tucked inside that jacket pocket or if he's planning to keep Wes in line on the threat of violence alone.

"Shame." I sigh, taking a sip of my champagne and savoring the burn of the bubbles against my tongue. I've definitely acquired a taste for pain. "You seem really… *frustrated*."

They're standing close enough together that I can see both of them at once.

It's a ruinous sight. They are both so devastatingly beautiful, sharing some of the same strong features and yet possessing their own differences too.

An angel and a demon, a god and a devil.

I see Remy's jaw clench at the same time a smirk flickers in the corner of Wes' lips.

“Quite frustrated, truly. I was having a lovely dream before I was pulled from sleep and stabbed.”

I don’t know what possesses me. I lean into him and press a kiss to his cheek. “Funny, I felt the same way when I was enjoying vacation with my best friend one day and then I woke up tied to a table.” It’s a whisper just for him, but either my words or my breath against the shell of his ear do him in. He groans.

Remy shifts on his feet. I can feel the tension rolling off of him like a dark cloud getting ready to swallow us all. If Dimitri hadn’t left, I am certain that Remy would have stalked away from Wes by now.

“Now I’m picturing you tied up again.” His voice is hoarse as he strains to contain himself. A big bad man like Wes surely isn’t used to being so helpless, and probably not used to being unable to do anything about his desire.

“Shut up,” Remy growls. “Or I’ll let my blade slip over your tongue ‘til it’s forked in two to look like the serpent you are.”

Wes’ grin deepens. “Careful, brother. You’ll make your whore come in the middle of your father’s wake if you keep talking like that.” There’s the barest pause before he continues. “Look at her. You’d never know just by looking at her, but violence turns her on.” His eyes shift to me, laying me bare. “I felt how wet you were against me baby. I bet you’re dripping for me right now… for *us*. Maybe Remy will share if you ask him nicely?”

I suck in a breath, but it makes me feel like I’m about to pass out.

Wes glances around. Somehow, we’ve been uninterrupted all this time, but I’m suddenly aware of how many people are around us, watching, maybe listening. He seems to be in agreement, because he steps forward. Remy catches him roughly against his side, though Wes wasn’t going far. His voice is low for me now, returning the favor from a moment before. “I bet your cunt was dripping for me before… when I had you on the other end of the blade, tied up on that table. You don’t have to be ashamed of it, Claire.”

“You’re right,” I whisper, letting my eyes flutter closed. Maybe if I don’t see the self-satisfied smirk on his lips, it will make my lie easier to swallow. I dust my fingers along his arm, hidden under the heavy suit jacket I assume came from Remy. “I am dripping right now.” My words come out unintentionally breathy—the result, I’m sure, of everything in me swelling

with need and squeezing the air out of my lungs to accommodate space for everything else.

I brush my thumb over his wrist gently enough that when he hisses at the sting of my touch on his raw skin, he doesn't automatically assume it's intentional. I close my hand around his and squeeze with every bit of strength I have in me, until I feel warmth spread out beneath my fingertips.

Wes' knees buckle and he's just about to fall to them when a man swoops in and catches him under the arm. Remy makes a move for something inside his jacket, but the man turns and shows him something on his phone. Whatever it is, it's good enough for Remy to pawn him off on the stranger.

Remy stalks away before I can even say anything in my own defense. Wes is moaning in pain, but the man who's with him pats him on the back, telling him to 'let it out' and I realize that Wes just looks like he's grieving the man he's here to grieve.

Well played, stranger.

I glance down at the blood on my hands—it's not a lot—and drain the rest of my champagne, letting the condensation on the glass lubricate the blood so that when I wipe my palms over the back of my dress, they come mostly clean.

I've got to find Remy and—

What? Make sure he doesn't think I want Wes? Tell him his sister told us it's fine to fuck around? Beg him to take me out of my head for a few minutes? A night? The duration of my time in Costa Rica?

I don't honestly know what I'll do when I find him, but I need to be near him the way I need to breathe.

I'm halfway across the room when a man steps in my path, barring my exit.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I manage a small smile. It’s a wake after all, and Rhea and Remy are both gone now, which makes me feel strangely obligated to at least pretend to be gracious to the people who came to pay their respects to the late Jonathan Boudreaux.

The man who stands before me is maybe twice my age—maybe not that much. He isn’t quite old enough that he looks like he would have much business with Johnathan, but also a bit too old to look like he’s one of Remy’s associates. His bright eyes assess me with interest that he doesn’t bother to hide, and while it’s awkward, it’s also not inappropriate. I stick my hand out for him to shake, unsure of what else could break the silence.

“I’m Claire.” I offer. “I’m a friend of the Boudreaux’s who’s been helping with everything.”

When he says nothing, only narrowing his eyes on me a little, I feed the silence. “Thank you for coming, Mister…”

“Massarini,” He’s slow to stretch out his hand, but when he takes mine, he wraps it firmly in his grip.

I’m not sure if it’s the possessiveness of his touch or the fact that I’m alone now without anyone in my corner, but I have a sudden realization that this man could very well have been the person who tried to purchase me at the auction. Cold sweat prickles along my arms and my stomach ties itself in knots. I wonder if Mr. Massarini knows who I am, or if maybe using my own name was stupid.

If the mafia is a real thing, my guess is Massarini is part of it. He lacks the all-dark eyes, hair, and beard/goatee combo I always pictured mafiosos to have, but the way he says his name is dark enough to make up for the rest. He is decidedly American, though the hint of an accent that I can't quite place makes his words slow and decadent. From a cursory glance, he looks like an unassuming all-American man ready to unknot his tie and watch a game of football. His brown hair is short and tidy, and he has laugh lines around his mouth like he's used to smiling, but he isn't doing it now. His mouth is pressed together like he's trying not to frown, and his eyes on me are disconcerting. "Victor Massarini."

I manage a smile despite the fact that Mr. Massarini went from sounding like Italian mafia to Russian mob and free my hand from his grasp, resisting the urge to wipe it over my dress.

"You look familiar, Miss…"

"Monroe." I supply, crossing my arms over my chest. Something about the way he looks at me feels wrong, but I can't put my finger on what exactly it is. He's not looking like he wants to undress me, but that's of little comfort, given the fact he appears to have seen me before. In a video, maybe, that Wes took in an attempt to dehumanize me?

I'm clenching my jaw and covering my uneasiness with a smile, torn between running off to find Remy or flat-out saying that he could have seen a video I was in and then waiting to see if recognition lights in his eyes. But I do neither of those things, because a woman steps up behind him and taps him on the arm. "Senator,"

The senator's eyes linger on me for a bit longer than necessary, like he's telling me not to go anywhere, before he turns to face the woman. "Mrs. Canterbury." The smile he offers her is charming, and the embrace he pulls her into looks only a touch insincere. "Looking stunning as ever."

I say nothing— especially not that Mrs. Canterbury looks like she's spent too much time under the scalpel. It's just as well because she doesn't seem to notice my presence. I'm considering slipping away from the situation, but Mr. Massarini's hand reaches out and lands on the back of my arm. It's casual enough that the newcomer is completely oblivious to it, and I don't know why I do it, but I stay. "Oh, you're too sweet. Where's that lovely wife of yours?" Mrs. Canterbury cranes her neck all around, as if she'll be able to spot the person she's looking for in this sea of black.

“Home, unfortunately. The doctor said it was a bit late in the pregnancy for such a long flight.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Canterbury tuts. “Jonathan would understand that. Never did I meet a more family-oriented man than him. Have you seen those ungrateful kids of his?”

With one line, she manages to seal my less-than-stellar first impression of her. I’m just opening my mouth to put her in her place on both account of Jonathan being a horrific monster and his kids being saints to put up with him, but I’m spared when a man comes and tugs Mrs. Canterbury away with a mumbled *‘hello’* to the senator.

“Give Addison my love!” The woman calls over her shoulder as she’s led away by the hand like a child who’s said too much.

Mr. Massarini plays the diplomat and assures her he will send her regards along, waving her off. When he turns back to me, he looks almost apologetic. “Don’t worry about her opinion. No one ever does.”

I’m not sure what that’s supposed to mean, but I don’t have to worry about it because I find myself speaking before I even have a chance to consider keeping the question to myself. “Senator?”

I remember Remy’s confession, his grim admittance that every branch of government is wrapped up in the trade of human lives. There is no organization that is safe, untouched by the decay of humanity.

“Guilty as charged.” He grins. “But you can call me Victor.”

Something about that feels wrong, but I don’t say as much.

“Oregon?” I guess, based purely upon his connection to Jonathan Boudreaux. Of course, Jonathan traveled everywhere so it’s not the soundest of conclusions. They could have met anywhere. I wonder if I should feel embarrassed that I don’t know my own state senators, but the flicker of it fades when he laughs.

“Washington.” His grin is the perfectly polished one of a career politician — perfect, too-large teeth on full display. Fucker has probably never had a worry in his life, raised rich and stayed rich, never knowing a problem daddy's money couldn't solve. If I looked up white male privilege in a dictionary, I bet this man’s face would be looking back at me. “State, not D.C.”

“The Evergreen State.” I force a laugh, but it has the opposite effect. His eyes narrow on me a little, and I wonder if I got that wrong. I didn’t live

there long, and I was a child at the time, but I certainly know it's densely packed with evergreen trees. Much of the pacific northwest is the same.

"I'm sorry?"

That's about all I can take of this conversation. "Um…" Looking over his shoulder, I spot Elaine.

Finally.

Her eyes lock on mine, and she laughs a little when I gesture for her to come to my aid. She may have been poisoning me, but a little bite of one of the cookies on the tray she's holding sounds favorable to standing here making idle conversation with this guy. "It's the Evergreen state, isn't it?"

When he only blinks, I begin to think I've slipped into another language. Raking my mind for any other point I can muster about Washington proves fruitless, so we marinate in uncomfortable silence for a moment. I'm so thankful for Elaine's arrival that I grab her hand and pull her the rest of the distance, hoping her arrival will cast the attention off of me. "Elaine, have you met Senator Massarini?"

The change in her is immediate—her face pales a few shades, her shoulders tense, and I think I can see the plate in her grip shaking ever so slightly.

The senator, on the other hand, cocks a grin. "Elaine?"

"Senator," she forces a smile. "Pleasure to meet you."

"You don't remember me?" He laughs, shaking his head in disbelief. "I'm Victor. Victor Massarini."

"You two know each other?"

It shouldn't surprise me. They *did* tell me that Elaine is practically family. It makes sense that she would know most of Jonathan's acquaintances.

"No," Elaine says firmly, at the same time that the Senator says "yes".

"I was a bit younger back then, but you don't look like you've aged a day." He shakes his head again, still grinning. "You weren't with us for long, but you were my favorite of the house staff."

Slow realization dawns over her and then it's Elaine's turn to shake her head in disbelief. "Victor?"

I take advantage of the opportunity that's presented itself. "I'll give you two a chance to catch up. It was nice to meet you, Senator."

"Victor," he amends with a wave of his hand. He doesn't even turn to look at me, a fact I couldn't be more grateful for.

I still don’t like the idea of calling him by that name, so I simply nod and rush away.

Lucky for me, Elaine knows this man well enough that I don’t feel bad about how quickly I ditched him upon her. I don’t have the bandwidth right now to entertain entitled people who have no concept of their own depravity. While on the surface the senator had seemed kind enough, something about the way he looked at me was unsettling enough to remind me that, despite my bravado, when you take away the sense of security I’ve found here, I’m only a helpless girl.

And I don’t like that one bit.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Rhea getting obliterated in the first two hours of our open house was not on my ‘father’s wake’ bingo card. I guess I should have seen it coming, considering how quickly she slipped back toward denial. She handled everything too well—because she’s not handling it at all—and it should have been obvious that she was going to end up like this. I just hope it’s a one-time thing, because between her and her best friend sauntering around my house in that goddam dress like a nymph, I think I may soon follow my father to the grave. They’re trying to kill me—maybe not outright, but intent is still ¾ of the crime. That’s why I’m in my study trying to slow my racing heart and quell the anger swelling through me.

Leaving Wes alone with a man that Dimitri hired only yesterday doesn’t sit well with me, but neither does standing by his side as he spews vitriol and fucks with his victim. And what’s worse is watching Claire fuck with him, like she’s getting off on the exchange… like she wants to fuck him. I could see her desire written on every inch of her body; She wears it like a brand on her forehead. I’m honestly not sure there’s a man downstairs who didn’t see it.

I know there was something going on between the two of them before I came along. If I hadn’t made myself a factor when I showed up to bring them to Costa Rica, would Claire have fucked him? Would she have happily sank to her knees for him, or fallen asleep in his bed only to wake with a collar on her neck? Given how she was acting just now, I’m not entirely sure she would have minded it. And there’s nothing wrong with that—I’ve

been with women who have all sorts of kinks—except the fact that Wes wouldn't have ever freed her. He'd use her until it was time to pass her along and wipe his hands clean of her blood.

That's the problem. Consent isn't sexy to a guy like Wes. I've been in the business long enough to have him figured out. The apple didn't fall far from the tree with him. Men who can have anything they want eventually get bored with the offerings and decide to take that which *doesn't* belong to them. It's the empire that our fathers built—a throne of gold atop the battered and broken bodies of thousands of men, women, and children. Wes and I were born at the top, balancing precariously on the lives and deaths of others. My father has lost his crown, but I'm still stuck at the top, trying to figure out how to get down.

Killing Davos won't end it. I know that. It's not enough to grant him his life when I know exactly what he's capable of. His death may ensure Claire's safety, since he's the purveyor of everything that takes place under his station. His blood on my hands will only make it harder to climb down from here—two more will pop up in his place. The only way to defeat a hydra is to first chop off the center head—the one thing that unites everyone in their empire of ruin.

The money.

I squeeze the glass in my hand so tight I'm surprised it doesn't shatter. I'm equally surprised when the door of my study opens slowly, and I look up to find Claire leaning quietly against the doorframe. "You okay?"

God. Just the sight of her is breathing life into my cock again after I finally just got it to stand by. "Fine."

I want her to turn away and go back downstairs, but I also don't want her to leave. And I don't want other men looking at her, talking to her, thinking about what's under that dress. It's wrong, I know, to want to try and possess her when I'll never lay claim to her. It's why I want to see her walk out of the room as much as I want her to shut the door and come ride on my dick until she's seeing stars.

"Once more," she crosses her arms, a smirk tipping the corner of her red-painted lips. "With feeling."

Cocky little thing. I manage to keep my eyes locked on hers when I tell her, "I don't have feelings."

Claire only laughs. "Sure."

She waits for an answer while I drain the rest of the bourbon from my glass and set it down with a little more force than necessary. But I don't have any response for that, so I ignore her for a moment longer, pretending to shuffle some things around on my desk. When I look back up at her, heat spills in my stomach. "What do you want, Claire?"

Her façade falters. For just a moment, I see hurt flash in her eyes. And then it's gone as quickly as it appeared. "I just wanted to be sure you were alright. You seemed… agitated."

I drop the pen I just picked up a moment earlier and stand. It only takes a few strides to cross the room and snatch her against my chest. She has the foresight to kick the door shut behind her, which is smart because I doubt she wants anyone to overhear what I'm going to say. "Do I seem *agitated*, Claire?"

I almost expect her eyes to spark with fear, but she only chuckles as she looks up at me, holding her thumb and forefinger up just a hair apart. "A little bit."

"Why on Earth would I be agitated? Doesn't every man dream of watching a beautiful woman eye-fuck his sadistic half-brother right in front of him?"

Instead of wincing at my accusation or the anger in my voice, she simply raises an eyebrow. The corner of her mouth twitches, like she's trying not to laugh. I want to wipe the smile off her face—maybe bury her face in the sheets until that smile turns to a scream while I hammer into her from behind so hard that she forgets other men even exist.

No.

Bad idea.

"What?" I demand. It's terse, more of a growl than a question.

She shrugs, humming some sort of noncommittal noise that only serves to irritate me further. I tighten my grip on her until she looks up at me with those clear eyes that I've been bewitched by since the start. "That's just the first time you've complimented me." When I only stare at her, she shrugs again. "I can never tell what's going on in your head. It's just nice to know."

I suppose she's right. I haven't told her she's beautiful; I assumed she knew as much. Besides, I've been trying to fight the attraction I feel to her, of course I'm not going to string her along with niceties. I need her to be willing to walk away and that won't happen if I let her know I think she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. As much as all that is true, her

words are also ironic. “You think I can tell what’s going on in *your* head? You think it doesn’t bother me to see you go from zero to sixty as easily as if you flipped a switch? I can’t tell if you’re ashamed of fucking me, or what we did before that.”

The air between us seems to thicken, but there’s no hesitation in her voice when she speaks. “None of it.”

Fuck.

The air isn’t the only thing that thickens. I can feel my erection growing in my slacks. She can probably feel it too, pressed as she is against me. I push her away from me, just lightly enough to give myself the strength to take a few steps back, putting a respectable distance between us. She never even teeters on her heels, never falters. Her gaze stays on my back as I turn away from her, trying to get a moment to compose myself.

“I don’t regret it, Remy. I’d do it again.”

Well, *that* doesn’t help matters.

The blood in my veins is heating rapidly, blood lust mixing with my lust for her tight body.

“Claire,” I sigh, raking my hand through my hair. I haven’t gotten the courage to turn back to face her. I think once I do, my resistance will snap like a rubber band stretched too far. I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop myself.

“Remy,” her voice mimics my frustration. I stiffen when her hands land on my shoulders. She massages them like she can erase all of the tension, the frustration, the confusion. She’s seducing me wholly—mind, body, soul. I’ve struggled for years with killing, done what was needed, and never wanted to do any of it. But part of what’s had me in a twist these last few days is the fact that for once, I didn’t just do what I had to. For once, I *liked* killing someone.

Every part of me hates to admit that, even to myself. I enjoyed taking the life of the piece of shit who ruined Claire’s life and a half dozen others. It’s not the peace of knowing that one less monster is walking the world that’s got my thoughts in knots. It’s the power I felt when I took his life and all the things he stole from his victims, the power that Claire stole back from him, that is filling me with a need as strong as my need for her.

But I am not the monsters that made me—I won’t succumb to it.

“What we did was wrong.” I tell her firmly.

“Then why did it feel so right?”

It’s just a whisper, but it startles me. I didn’t realize she was so close, but she’s pressing herself against me. The heels help with the height difference, but I imagine she’s on the tips of her toes all the same. I’ve lost track of what we’re talking about—the murder or the sex. My silence speaks for itself, and despite her earlier sentiment about not being able to tell what’s going on in my head, she answers the question I didn’t ask. “I mean both. If you want to kill them all, I’ll sharpen your knife along with my own. If you want to watch them burn, I’ll douse them in gasoline.”

They’re pretty words, maybe even a pretty thought. But I won’t let myself entertain them. They imply a future in which we’re together in some capacity. That’s not only unrealistic, it’s impossible. The battle I’m fighting will rage the rest of my life. I won’t let anyone else be wrapped up in it. I learned that lesson years ago. And given how I was ready to burn the world down when Claire was taken, I clearly can’t handle getting closer to her.

I spin around so that she can’t mistake the sincerity in my voice. This is too important to be delicate.

“There’s no future for you and me, Claire. There’s no world in which you and I will ever be anything more than tethered by my sister. I apologize if something I did has led you to believe that we could be more, but it will never happen.”

I almost expect her to crumble, or maybe just wince as if I’ve slapped her. I think maybe she’ll hold back tears, but her eyes will water, or she’ll try to fight me. Perhaps I’ve overestimated her opinion of me. Or, perhaps, it’s just that she’s not the same timid girl she was when she walked into my life. That shouldn’t scare me, but it does. Of all the murders I’ve had a hand in, that would be the one I regret most of all.

“I think you’ve misunderstood me, Remy.” Her voice is low, hinting at a laugh. “I’m not asking for anything. This isn’t me proposing marriage.” This time, she lets the chuckle break through her chest. It’s not the clear, unreserved sound I expect from her. It’s… condescending. Claire shakes her head, turning to go, but I snare her upper arm, spinning her back to face me at the same time as reeling her into me again. She’s so light she spins easily into me, throwing her hands out to brace against my chest a moment too late.

Her cockiness is gone as she looks up at me, her lips parted like she’s just waiting for the right words to find their way there. I weave my fingers

through her hair, making it clear that she's not going anywhere. "What were you proposing, then?"

I'm leaning into her; my words whisper over her lips. I brush the pad of my thumb over them, enjoying the velvety feel as they tremble under my touch. She told me she'd douse our enemies in gasoline, but I think she may have done the same to me. And she's the flame, dangerous temptress who can ruin everything I've worked to secure for the last few years. The longer she's near, the greater the chances that I'm going to be burnt… or she'll take us both out in a blaze of glory.

But what pretty fireworks we'd make, her and I, blazing bright one last time through the dark.

"Not many people know the truth about you, Remy. And not many people know the truth about me. I wasn't asking you to give me your last name. Give me your darkness, your shadows and sharp edges. Give me your pain and your rage. And take mine in return."

I want to devour her lips, the words from them are so fucking delicious. But I need to know that we're on the same page first. "We'll never go anywhere, Claire. One night?" I'm not sure if I'm asking her permission or warning her to fight against me and go. I'd let her go if she tried to get away from me, but she's not interested in getting away from me. In fact, I think she forms herself to me even more when her mouth whispers over mine.

"If one night is enough for you."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I’ve decided to fake it ‘til I make it, but the minute Remy’s mouth crashes into mine, I know I won’t be faking anything tonight. His tongue parts my lips without hesitation, seeking mine and finding it before staking his possession of it. His kiss is desperate and needy, which makes me wonder if he tried to put up a fight for his benefit or mine.

We’ve kissed before, but something about this time is different. It’s like we’ve surrendered to one another in this moment, like no one is holding back. I wrap my arm around his neck, feeling suddenly overwhelmed in the best way. Remy responds by slipping his knee beneath my thigh at the same time he lifts me around the waist, leaving me weightless, breathless. Instinct guides me to wrap my legs tight around him, hoping it will alleviate some of the aching need in my core. It doesn’t.

When his lips leave mine, it feels cruel… like a punishment for something from a past life, penance for a crime I have no knowledge of. Except, that’s not true. If he wants to punish me for anything, it’s for acting like I did in front of his brother… for letting him think I have any interest in the man who tried to destroy me. But Wes didn’t destroy me; he made me stronger.

If Remy means to punish me, he isn’t doing it by walking away from me. His lips leave mine, but never me, though it turns into a series of quick kisses that he plants on the corner of my lips, the side of my chin, the edge of my jaw. It’s agonizingly slow and wonderful all at once as his soft kiss peppers the side of my neck, stopping for a moment to let his tongue lave

over the skin there. I tighten my grip on him, my nails close to biting into the tender skin at the back of his neck, and when his teeth nip against the space between my neck and collarbone, I yelp.

I'm not sure how long I'm going to last before I fall apart, and I'm desperate to get us out of these clothes, to feel his skin against mine. Dragging my fingers from the back of his neck to the top of his chest, I feel for the fabric of his jacket, hooking my fingers underneath it before pushing both sleeves off his shoulders.

He spins us so fast that I feel dizzy for a moment, and then he carries me across the room in a few strides. I open my eyes to see that we're moving further into the room, and not even a second later, he sits me on the edge of something hard. My dress is still hiked up from where I had my legs wrapped around him, and I can feel the cold surface under my thighs. If he looks a little higher, he'll inevitably realize that I opted to skip underwear this time, and for the briefest moment I worry what he'll think of me when he figures it out. Slut? Whore? Desperate?

But I put those things out of my mind as he wedges himself between my thighs and shrugs his jacket down the rest of the way, letting it drop to the ground behind him. He turns his attention quickly to the straps of my dress, more interested in getting me naked than getting himself undressed. It's not going to take much—my dress also didn't fare well with a bra, meaning all that separates me from him is the thin layer of this dress and the clothes on his body.

I let him slip one strap down my arm and then dive in for another taste of his lips. He takes the bait, tangling one fist in my hair as he explores my mouth. His tongue has explored *other* parts of me, and I'm desperate for more of it.

I can't get his clothes off fast enough. His starched shirt is stiff under my fingers as I work to find the top button, thankful he'd already ditched the tie before I walked in. It takes a little more patience than I anticipated, but Remy doesn't seem to mind. In fact, he kisses me enough that I'm starting to feel breathless, dizzy. He's stealing the breath out of my lungs, and I don't want him to stop… not even for a second. I'd die for him in this moment, give him my last precious moments of life on this Earth. My fingers fumble over the buttons, and I'm so lost in his kiss I don't dare open my eyes to try and see what I'm doing.

I think I've nearly gotten them all when I push the shirt off his shoulders, my fingers skating against his hot skin as I send it to the floor. My hands move immediately to his belt, but it takes a moment to even figure out the clasp. His erection is just under my touch, just out of reach.

Remy chuckles against my mouth, and I open my eyes to see the faint makings of a smile on his face. "Need some help?"

His words are spoken against my lips, still wet with his kiss, and they send a thrill through me. But I let my hands move from the infernal belt buckle to the center of his chest, which is heaving with his breaths. He's working hard to control himself, and that's the opposite of what I want, though I do get a wicked sense of satisfaction at the idea that I make him lose control of himself at all.

When I push him back, he doesn't go far. His eyes flick down to where my hand just attempted to shove him away, then to mine. He's just opening his mouth to ask what I did that for, when I tell him what I want.

"Strip."

His hesitation is brief, and then he unbuckles his belt and wrenches it free of the loops in a single, easy motion. It falls to the floor with a loud clatter that sends thrills through me. Every part of me is tight, on edge with anticipation, and heat surges through me as his deft fingers flick open the button on his slacks. They stay there, hanging low on his hips, while he kicks his shoes off. I take advantage of the moment, admiring his beauty. It's unfair, truly, that anybody could look like *that*.

Remy looks like he was carved by Michelangelo in the Renaissance, with his sleek form but rippling muscles. When he wears those suits and button-ups, they betray nothing of the powerful physique underneath, which is strong and masculine without being bulky. But when those clothes come off, he doesn't look like the type to cover up with a suit. He looks like he belongs to blue-collar work, the kind that calluses your hands and humbles your spirit and leaves you tired to the bone. Remy's spirit is humbled by another line of work, and he's tired in a much different way… in a way that complements my own exhaustion.

But tonight, neither of us are tired. We're not paper-thin or battle-weary, we're alive with purpose… even if that purpose is just to find pleasure in our mutual pain.

Remy hooks his thumbs beneath the waistband of his pants and boxers together, and all at once his glorious erection springs free. This is the first

time I’ve actually seen it, the first I’ve gotten a chance to take him in. An illicit heat spreads like wildfire through me as I actually take him in and realize that he’s been inside of me before I ever even got to appreciate this view. I still don’t get to appreciate it for long, because his fist wraps around the base of his cock and he pumps himself slowly, never looking away from me.

God.

I never would have thought watching a man pleasure himself would do anything for me, but the sight is too fucking delicious. My mouth is practically watering, and it’s not the only thing. I can feel the desire growing between my legs, warring between which part of me gets him first.

It takes a moment of me watching him lazily stroking himself for me to realize he's waiting for further instruction. I hadn’t intended to continue to give him directions when I told him to undress on impulse, but there’s no denying the rush as he relinquishes his power to me for a minute. “Sit.” I tell him, pointing at the large office chair behind his desk.

Remy’s lip flickers a bit, but he says nothing as he walks slowly past me, his eyes not leaving mine until he passes me. I don’t turn yet to face him or watch him sit, taking the moment to compose myself. I hear the creak of the chair when he sinks against the leather and spin my whole body to face him now, dragging my ass round the desk so that I have an unobstructed view of him just in front of me. The chair is close enough, so when I slip off the edge of the desk, I brace my hands against his thighs for a moment to keep me from toppling into him. When I sink quickly to my knees, he’s immediately level with my lips.

A breath that sounds like excitement leaves him when I press my lips to his thigh, giving myself a moment to try and prepare to handle his size. He arches against the chair a little, and I can’t help grinning against his groin as I move my kisses around him, fast, teasing, delicate touches. There’s a small amount of fear in me that I don’t know how to do this, but the fear is less for me and more for my ego, worrying he won’t like it because I don’t know what I’m doing. But he seems to be enjoying himself so far, so I let my tongue dart out between my lips and swirl against his skin.

He tastes like salt and smells like soap, and his fingers brush the hair off my face delicately. A quick glance up at him takes me by surprise, cause while I expected to find him with his eyes closed and his head tipped back, he’s watching me. His eyes are unguarded; I can see the pleasure in them,

molten and hungry. We lock eyes for a moment, and though I'm still completely clothed, I feel oddly exposed… and oddly comfortable with it.

I close my eyes when I look away from him, drawing my tongue along the underside of his shaft and enjoying the way it quakes in the wake of my movement, bobbing away from me and then back to my tongue to beg for more, which is exactly what I'm going to give him.

I swirl my tongue over the head of his cock, letting my mouth water before I take him deep inside. Despite the protesting of my jaw, the eroticism of having his hot cock in a place no man has ever been sends off a shot of lust, and I decide not to overthink it. I simply do what feels right, sliding my tongue along the length of him while my lips press around him from the top. He groans, his fingers kneading against my scalp. When I bob downward, letting him slide deeper into my mouth, he rewards me with my name. "*Claire*."

Spoken like that, it sounds like a prayer, and the realization that I'm on my knees for a god isn't lost on me. It's also not lost on me that this god is powerless to me in this moment, a thought that emboldens me to slide back off of him, agonizingly slowly. I feel his grip tighten, desperation driving him to not loosen his hold on me, to not let this end. But I'm only just beginning.

I brace my hands on the armrests, giving myself a little bit of leverage so that when I slide back down over him, I see just how far I can take him. I don't even make it to the base before my throat starts to close in warning, so I retreat slowly and try again. This time, I get him deeper, though it's not without triggering my gag reflex. "Fuck, Claire." Remy groans, angling his hips as I retreat.

This time, I suck in a breath when his cock is on the tip of my tongue and let it go slowly, relaxing my whole body so that when I cover him again, I go deeper before my body can stop me.

It's like playing with fire, getting so close to swallowing him, feeling my lungs ache for air as he obstructs my throat. And it's fucking intoxicating. I don't care if I get burnt right now; I want to be one with the fire.

"You don't have to…"

Remy's voice trails off when I get him deep and roll my tongue around his cock. I feel him tug at my hair so hard he almost pulls me away, but when I start to slip off, his hips rise to meet me. I pump my mouth along his

cock a few times, delighting in every gasp, every thrust of his hips, every time he says my name.

When I feel him against the back of my throat, he growls, almost like he's in pain... or angry. Both hands tangle in my hair this time, so that when I slide back, he uses his leverage to pull me the rest of the way off him. Spit drips down my chin, and I open my eyes to stare at him, bewildered.

What did I do wrong?

"You can't do that if you don't want me to lose control, Claire." He huffs.

It takes a moment to realize what he means by that. I don't get the chance to tell him I don't want his control—I want him feral—because his fingers brush against my lips, which are swollen from the last… however long that was. "I'm not ready for this to be over. Last time, we rushed through this. Tonight, I'm going to take my time, getting to know every inch of your body. I'm going to know what your face looks like before you come, what sounds you make when you're close to the edge, what touch makes you go absolutely mad."

Fortunately, I'm still on my knees, because I think they just went a bit weak at that. "If we're only going to have one night, it will be the best damn night of our lives." His voice is more subdued with those words—almost sad—but I don't have time to contemplate them because he's not finished. "There's just one thing we need to discuss first."

"What?" I breathe, preparing myself for a list of all the reasons that this is not going to extend beyond anything more than tonight, in his office like a kinky little secretary who exists for his pleasure. I don't care. I just need him, for however long he's willing to give himself to me.

"Last time we acted on impulse. It was stupid. We didn't use protection."

Something about his words feel like a slap in the face—maybe because he called it stupid, even though it was. Or maybe it's because he's right. "I had my annual in March," I tell him. It's an oddly vulnerable thing to do, made even stranger by the fact that it feels awkward to discuss this when his dick was literally just in my mouth. You'd think not many things would be strange at this point, but here we are.

"I'm clean and I haven't been with anyone until you." I shudder a little, my thoughts suddenly taking control at the realization that it wouldn't have been true if he hadn't shown up when he did after Jovich dumped me in the den of predators. I'm not sure how virtuous Wes' intentions were since he

certainly had no qualms about seeing me hurt, but I don't doubt that it wouldn't have been long before something happened.

"I'm clean, too." Remy says, pulling me back to reality. A reality that I want, that I crave. A reality that I'm soaking in every second of to cast off the possibilities of the past.

I realize he's still waiting for something, and shake my head, trying to dislodge the unwanted thoughts. "I'm on birth control."

He breathes a sigh of relief, and I realize we never discussed that after last time either. Has he been worrying all week about whether I'd suddenly tell him I'm not and we'd actually played a sort of Russian Roulette that night?

"Thank God." He groans. "Because I need to be bare inside of you."

I don't even get a minute to process that, because he stands then and snatches me against his chest, lifting me effortlessly with his hand on my ass. It's a strange cross between carrying me like a sack of potatoes and a bridal carry, but I melt against him all the same, ready and willing for whatever he wants to do to me.

"I'm not going to fuck you on my desk, Claire. I don't need you getting a concussion when I fuck you within an inch of your life."

His words are harsh, his tone is dark, and I think some of the anger of watching me flirt with his brother has returned because we just went from sweet and hot to bitter and blazing in the space of a few words. And they don't frighten me, don't repulse me, don't make me nervous for what's to come. Instead, I feel my pussy clench at air, desperate to be filled.

I do feel panic though, as he carries me toward the door and the realization that he means to take me to his room sinks in. "We can't go out there naked. What if Rhea sees?"

But it's not the door he goes for. He heads for a wall in the corner that's lined with bookshelves, entirely covered in texts of varying sizes and color. I can't even come up with any explanation as to what he's planning, so it takes a moment for my brain to catch up when he fumbles around with something on the shelf and then there's a little sound like a latch popping open. A cool breeze hits me before the rest of it, so that even when he carries me into his room and sets me on my feet, where I sway a moment, I haven't processed what just happened.

Remy dives into the center of his bed and turns to me expectantly.

"D-did you just...?"

His soft lips quirk into a grin at my confusion. “My office and my bedroom are adjoining.” He nods.

“Through a secret bookcase?”

It’s the stuff of my childhood Scooby Doo dreams and my bookish fantasies all rolled into one. I think every girl who immersed themselves in a book to escape reality as a child dreamed about being rich enough to have a secret passageway behind a bookshelf. Remy doesn’t seem like the type who hid away in a book to keep from suffering through reality. But maybe I just don’t know him well enough.

“My home is a safe place, Claire.”

I want to ask what that is supposed to mean, but it seems that will have to wait for another time because the somewhat solemn look on his face disappears, chased away by a twist of his lips. “It’s your turn.” He nods his head at me, but I don’t know what it’s my turn for until he follows it up with a simple command.

“Strip.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Panic blossoms across her beautiful face for a moment, but she quickly reigns it in, rolling her shoulders. I'm not sure if that's part of the show or an attempt to ease some anxiety about what we're going to do tonight. I don't really care, because she slips one strap off her shoulder, letting it rest against her arm while she hooks a finger beneath the other one and pulls that down too, so that her dress is held in place only by her breasts. My cock twitches in anticipation. Part of me hates myself for making her stop when she had me so close to coming on her tongue. I want to see her swallow my seed and paint it on her lips, and I was so damn close to letting that happen. But I need to bury myself inside her sweet heat, to drown in her, and that would have taken too long to happen if I let her finish before.

She reaches behind herself, and it takes me as long to figure out she's finding a zipper as it takes her to tug the thing down, which is far too long and also surprisingly quick. In the silence, I think I can hear the metal teeth opening, letting her out of the restraints she's been clinging to since we met.

When she drops the zipper, one side of the dress falls away to reveal a soft breast, her nipple pebbled with the weight of my eyes on her. My cock jumps in anticipation, so I wrap my fist around it and pump once while she looks from where she's just exposed herself to me. When our eyes lock, something in her becomes emboldened enough to make a show of peeling the fabric away from the other side of her body.

She's delicious, standing topless in front of me with her tits just begging to be squeezed, sucked, teased. But I don't get to enjoy the sight of them

alone for long, because Claire has her dress gathered in her hands and slowly shimmies it down the length of her torso, revealing the intoxicating expanse of her stomach bit by bit. A jewel shimmers at her naval piercing—maybe it's the way the light catches it, but I hadn't noticed that before.

I'm trying to guess what sort of panties she opted for tonight and hoping it's something delicate that I can rip off of her when she skates the dress down her hips, one side at a time. No strings, no waistband, nothing. She's completely naked in my room, bare to me, smooth and sleek and so ready to be bent over the side of the bed and fucked into the mattress.

Fuck.

I didn't expect that.

Claire lets the dress fall to her feet, where I imagine it pools around her. I can't be bothered to find out, though, because there's not a chance in hell I'm looking away from her right now to find out. She steps gingerly out of the pile at her feet, so that I can't tell if she's deliberately walking slow to torture me or if it's the heels I never saw her take off that are inhibiting her speed.

She looks like she descended from the stars, a goddess from another plane, alive with confidence and grace. I sink against my headboard, my cock aching at the distance I've just put between us, and then beckon her forward, reassuring her that I want her to come to me. The slightest tinge of red flushes across her cheeks, and I think it's embarrassment. But she has nothing to be embarrassed about—this is the hottest thing I've ever seen, watching her become another person in front of me, not yet entirely uninhibited, but also needy enough to cast aside her pride.

She doesn't come around the side of the bed, rising instead to the edge and then lifting her leg to climb over the footboard, offering me a brief glimpse of her slick core before getting both knees under her again. Her eyes flash up to mine, seeking confirmation. "Crawl to me." I nod.

I wish my bed was bigger, so that the image of her crawling toward me, her eyes stuck on mine, could last just a bit longer. It ends too quickly, but I can't be sad about it as she crawls over me and my cock drags against her smooth skin so that she looms over me, looking down. She's not pinned to the mattress, but she is also not in control. The look in her eyes tells me as much—she wants me to command her, to throw her around, to give her instruction. She wants to be controlled in the moment, and I want to own her, so who am I to complain?

“Ride my tongue.” I tell her, my hands skating up the length of her thighs until they come to rest on her ass.

She turns immediately purple, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d think she’s choking. She certainly looks like it when she opens and closes her mouth. “I… I can’t.”

“You can and you will.” I assure her, using my leverage on her ass to push her further up the bed. I hear her grip the headboard.

“Remy, I—” She’s pushing against me, trying to sink back down so that she can sit, but she’s no match for me.

“Claire.” I say. My tone brokers no room for argument. “I want you to ride my tongue. I want you to grind that pretty little pussy all over my face until you come so that I can taste you. Do you understand?”

She closes her eyes for a moment, torn between desire and whatever is holding her back here. She’s still poised over me so that I can see her glistening with need, but some fear is holding her back and with her head tilted down toward me, her face is cast in shadows so that I can’t read whatever is on her face.

“What if I crush you?”

It’s an irrational fear given that I could throw her off me with both hands tied behind my back, but I’m trying to get her out of her head, not give her more reasons to stay in it. “That would be an honorable death.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to slap me, but she laughs instead, and I decide to take things into my own hands. I sink lower on the mattress and lock her thighs on either side of my head, keeping her needy little pussy positioned right over my mouth. I hear the start of some sort of protest, but it fades quickly, turning into a sigh when I smooth my tongue over the rigid fold of her clit. She inches away from me just a little, resting more of her weight on the headboard, so I tighten my grip on the backs of her legs and bring her back to me.

She’s so ripe for the taking. I could slide into her right now without the slightest bit of resistance from her body, it’s so wet and achy for me. But that’s not what I want. Right now, I want to shatter her fucking world with the most intense orgasm she’s ever known and then, before she even has a chance to put herself back together, I’ll fuck her.

Above me, Claire is a beautiful sight. Her back is arched, trying to get some leverage from me, the sleek form of her body curving away from me, her head tossed back even though she’s gripping the headboard like it’s all

that stands between her and the grave. And maybe it is, because if it wasn't there, I may drive her into the wall with the force I'm about to unleash on her. She screams when I suck her clit into my mouth, mashing it against my tongue, and then promptly drops one hand to cover her mouth. I know she's worried about someone hearing her, but right now, I want every fucking guest down there to hear her. I want the whole fucking world to know that I'm taking her right now, to hear the sounds of her pleasure. I want her to scream again, so I pull harder this time, taking her by surprise so that she has to grip my shoulder to keep from collapsing.

"Remy—" Her voice is a jagged little whisper, something between a moan and a plea for mercy. When we did this before, I was possessed with need, our mutual passion overflowing, our darkness spilling out around us, bleeding from one to the other so that the moment was tinged by desperation, a long-suffering flame that roared to life and then was promptly extinguished.

This is different. This time, I'm savoring her every sound, every touch, every lick.

I take my name as a plea for more and suck harder, grazing my teeth gently along the delicate bundle of nerves. "Let go, Claire."

She whimpers, and I think she's about to pull away from me again, so I snare her harder, showing her that she's at my mercy. Unable to pull away, she eases back toward me, finally relaxing enough to give me what I want.

I fumble with the clasp on her shoe as she abandons the fight and finally drops her weight onto me, though I can tell she's still gripping the headboard in case she needs the leverage. I push her shoes off, one at a time, and throw them across the room, not caring where they land. Now that she's given up on resisting and her ankles are free, I grip them instead of her thighs and tug just enough to sink her deeper onto me.

Her moans crescendo, growing shorter and louder as I bring her closer to the edge. And then I stop all at once, her wet pussy weeping around me, the sweet scent of her need filling my lungs. I pull away just enough so that when she looks down at me in agonized bewilderment, she can see my wet lips form the command. "Grind."

A little whimper escapes her, and then she does as she's told, circling her hips over my eager tongue, using me to bring herself pleasure. I swipe a finger along her slit, collecting the slick proof of her arousal, and then push a finger inside of her. When she stops, I stop, too, waiting for her to

remember that she’s supposed to be doing what I told her. Another whimper claws its way through her throat, and then she bears down on me more, her back arching and her nails digging into me as she finds her bliss on my tongue.

I know she’s right there when her groan turns into a scream, so I swirl my tongue in tandem with her movements and grip her ass with my free hand while she rides it out. Her motions slow, her breaths turn to pants, and she makes to swing her leg over me to join the other, but we’re not done.

I grip her tighter, making it clear that she’s not going anywhere, and double my efforts despite her protests, which all sound like my name and various groans of agonizing pleasure. “Rem—”

I pull away from her just enough to whisper into her beautiful pussy. “Give me another one.”

Claire shifts her weight onto the other arm, catching her grip on the headboard with her opposite hand. I haven’t given her a chance to answer, diving immediately back into my work and sliding another finger into the gloriously silky heat of her. “I—c—can’t—” Her pants are desperate, her attempt to free herself futile. She wants to be here as much as she does not, to feel the rush of another orgasm as much as she wants to be free of the pressure building in her.

“You can.” I say, though I’m not sure she can hear me since I’ve barely pulled my lips off of her to speak them before I suck her clit between my teeth again.

The war in her continues to wage as I fuck her with my fingers, coating them with the proof of her last orgasm. She crashes onto me until she needs an escape from the pleasure, and then comes promptly back for more, driven to desperation. I’m drawing it out, enjoying every second as she waffles between pleasure and overload. I could do this forever—let her edge herself with my help. But my cock aches to be where my fingers are, so I put her out of her misery, curling my fingers inside of her and caressing that spongy little spot buried deep inside. She immediately stops moving. I think she spits out the word fuck, but it’s hard to hear past my pulse thundering in my ears. Her legs are trembling on either side of me, and her arms above me, though I think for two very different reasons.

I thrust into her again, curling my fingers at the top so that when she tries to move away, it only results in the vigorous bouncing of her breasts. She

can’t move, even if she wanted to—her body has already begun surrendering to me. “Stop, I—”

But whatever she meant to say, it’s lost in a cry.

And then a moment later, she finally makes good on the threat from before. She worried she’d crush me, but neither of us thought she may drown me. I open my mouth to drink from her, but I can’t work fast enough to swallow it all. The liquid spills over my chin while I lap at what I can get, taking all that I can while she attempts to wiggle away from me. When I finally let her go, Claire scrambles quickly away, her face burning. For a moment, I worry she’s angry that I continued when she was clearly trying to get away from me, but then I realize it’s not anger. She’s… embarrassed.

“I—” Wrapping her arms across herself, she hides her nakedness from me and buries her face in her palms a moment, trying to collect herself. Her chest still heaves, and when I sit up and peel her hands away from her face, she’s still scarlet. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?” I manage to repeat the word before I laugh, taking the moment to catch my breath too. I thread my fingers through her hair, pushing it off her face so that she has a clear view of me when I speak again. I have to tilt her chin up so that she looks at me, and even then, she averts her eyes from mine until I run my thumb over her lips. “That was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I’d drown in you the rest of my life to give you pleasure.”

She opens her mouth, probably to protest, and I seize the opportunity she’s presented. I pull her against me and crush her lips against mine, letting her feel the truth of my words and the wetness that came from her. When I push my tongue against hers, I make her taste herself too.

It’s when she melts beneath me, accepting the second-hand taste and what just happened and how much I need her right now, that I realize I’m in trouble.

Earlier I was terrified by the idea of turning into one of the men I seek to destroy.

Now that thought is eclipsed by the realization that Claire has somehow become what no one else has ever been.

Other than my sister, there has only been one person in my life that I’d die for, and I had to leave her before my darkness destroyed her. Rhea has been the only person in my life that I’d live for, and I had to leave her on the other side of the world so that she could be safe. But now there’s a new

woman in my world, and the danger with this one is that I've just realized I would both die for her *and* live for her.

That's the scariest fucking thought I've ever had.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Aside from the mind-bending orgasms he gave me in quick succession, our second time together is nothing like the first. My body is tired, physically drained after the intensity of what just happened, but Remy's awake with the need for more and I'm not going to deny him after that. As much as I feel like I need to curl up and sleep, I also somehow ache for more of him. I'm not sure I have much left to give, but I'll take what he offers… his fingers curling in my hair, his lips whispering something against my ear as he lines himself up with my slit, the groan as he pushes inside of me all at once, meeting no resistance and filling me all the way.

"So wet for me, Claire."

I'm not too exhausted for the slightest bit of embarrassment to start slipping beneath my skin. But there's something more demanding, something that pushes my little bit of shame aside—desire.

Being filled with him floods me with the need for more, so that when he pulls back to give himself more room to slide in again, it sends static need racing along my spine. I lift my hips to meet him, seeking his friction, my need for what I'm getting renewed. I'm on the edge of delirium, caught between wanting this, *needing* it, and needing a moment to regroup.

I can still feel my clit throbbing with the force of my orgasm, and I know that any touch there right now would be absolutely excruciating, and yet I want more.

"Needy little thing." He laughs, sinking into me and chasing a moan out of me as proof of what he's just said. I'm not sure if he's referring to me or

more specifically my vagina, but at the moment, we're both needy whores, so I don't object.

I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I've only been with a few men, and none of them ever wanted to talk during this. And yet, his words are doing as much for me as his thick cock stroking my insides. I don't know how to reciprocate that, or if he would even *want* me to reciprocate that, but I close my eyes anyway and say the words that spring to my tongue.

"Yes." I moan, perfectly timed as he slides in again. "I need you. I need you to fill me, Remy."

For the briefest second, I worry about my word choice and whether it's too specific, but we've already established we're both clean and I'm on birth control. And I want him to not just fill me with his cock, but with his cum too. I want him to paint my insides with his lust, to feel his seed slipping between my thighs. His thrusts pick up, apparently spurred on by my words.

"I want you to go back downstairs—" he grunts, hitting deep inside and pulling a moan out of me "with my cum dripping down your legs."

The thought is depraved and yet wildly erotic. My lips part to let out whatever noise his deliciously naughty suggestion provoked, but he covers my mouth with his and plunges his tongue against mine before it meets the air. I'm desperate as I kiss him, and he swallows my sounds just as easily as he swallowed my orgasm.

He seems to be composed despite the fact that he unraveled me long ago… all the way up until I hear him swear under his breath. It takes me a moment to realize he pulled away—I think I've started to disconnect from my body, honestly. It's like there's a single thread connecting my soul to my body at this point, and while the pleasure is blissful, it's sending me to another plane.

I open my eyes to see him moving away and open my mouth to ask what's wrong, but his hands are on my hips as he pulls out of me so quickly that the loss is visceral. For one millisecond, I worry that I did something wrong or that he just reached a very anticlimactic climax. But no sooner does he pull out of me, than he flips me all at once so that I'm flat on my stomach. I'm suddenly aware of the silk sheets and how luxurious they feel rubbing against all of my hot and needy bits. He's in me again with one thrust, and it's enough to make me come alive again.

Despite my exhaustion, I need to invite him deeper inside me, give him more access, so I get my hands under me, lifting my hips and presenting him with my ass like some sort of gift, letting my nipples drag against the sheets. Each of his thrusts drags them over the mattress, keeping them hard as the rest of me melts.

"You take my dick so well, baby."

The surprise crackles quickly like lightning through me, hand-in-hand with pride. This is the first time he's called me anything other than Claire, and while I know better than to think anything of it, the praise in combination with the affection of a pet name is too much. It's too soft, too gentle, too… easy.

"Hurt me."

I don't think about the words before I say them… I don't think about them *as* I say them. It's once they're in the air and he's slamming into me that I feel a rush of shame, embarrassment. It's fucked to ask to be hurt during what should be something beautiful. It's proof of how unhinged I am—a classic study in victims of sexual abuse.

I'm not hiding anything from him anymore, laying it all out for him to see every ugly piece of me.

And to my surprise, Remy doesn't even hesitate. His hand lands on my ass so heavily I jump forward, my head hitting the base of the headboard as he moves forward with me, pinning me between him and the wood. My cry is short, confused by the pleasure and pain mingling together as the stinging sends hot blood rushing south. He grips me around the waist and reaches up to grip one of my nipples firmly between his fingers.

I feel myself clenching around him, desperate to keep him inside of me. The pressure is building in me again, and this time I think I won't even explode. I'll either have to suffer a slow release or if he continues to stoke me like this, I'll implode—collapsing in on myself. "I'll give you whatever you want, Claire." His voice is husky, and I think he may be struggling to keep it together. That only makes me want him to fall apart with me. "You want me to hurt you? I will." He hits deep inside, his movements amazingly controlled, both on the impact and retreat. "But you have to ask me for it."

Remy's words are hot in my ear, sending a sort of half-shudder down my spine.

You have to ask me for it.

“Hurt me!” I say, louder this time, emboldened by his encouragement. “More.” I moan.

And he does just that, grabbing my other breast in his free hand and pinching both nipples in tandem. “Oh God.” I’m almost as scared as I am aroused, dripping wet and begging for more.

“I’m no God.” His hands release their grip all at once. I worry I’ve angered him for a second, but then his hands move in opposite directions—one north, where it comes to rest at the base of my neck, and one south, where it caresses my ass. “But I’ve got you on your knees and I’m about to send you to heaven.”

I don’t even have time to contemplate what that is supposed to mean. If this was any other one-night stand and not the man who’d single-handedly saved me from whatever grisly fate I’d have faced at the hands of his brother, I’d think that was a literal threat… particularly as his hand starts to squeeze.

“Remy,” I gasp, panic starting to take the place of the arousal that’s been buzzing inside of me for the last several hours. I want to feel pain, not *die*… not yet.

And yet, I feel the slickness pooling between my legs, my desire growing in the face of potential danger as I struggle to get a breath.

“Relax.” He commands.

I can’t see his face, but I can hear the gentleness in his tone, and my body responds automatically as if it can’t help but obey him, even in the name of self-preservation. Despite the nervousness flitting around in my stomach, there’s also desire unraveling inside of me. I feel the tension in my spine ease as my fear melts away, thawed by my need to take whatever he is willing to give me. I unconsciously back into him, surrendering control of my own body to Remington Boudreaux.

“That’s it, sweetheart.” His whisper is ragged, and I almost think it wasn’t meant for me, like it’s an unconscious slip of his tongue betraying a private thought. Baby was startling but casual enough. Sweetheart feels so… intimate. He’s never called me anything like that before. But whether it was for me or him, I ease more as his fingers tighten on my skin. It’s not hard enough to block the passage of air, but it’s knowing he could that is alluring. I’m flirting with danger, and I learned earlier just how intoxicating I find that.

He’s still buried inside me, stretching me around him as his fingers drum over the delicate skin of my throat, and the anticipation is killing me. I can’t sit still—I need the friction.

When I rotate my hips, Remy groans and pushes me forward. I barely get my hands under me in time to stop myself from falling face-first into the mattress—not that it matters. His grip on me keeps me in place so that I don’t have to worry as he slams into me so suddenly it has me squeeze my eyes shut as the stars bloom to life in my darkness. They dance faintly on the horizon of my consciousness as he hammers into me, his grip on my neck the only thing keeping me upright even as the dark gets darker.

My entire body is hot, kissed by the fire scorching between us. Everything burns so good—the way he’s stretching me, the heat spilling out of my pores, the jagged breaths I take as he deprives me of air little by little, methodically. I try to speak, to tell him to never let go, but no sound makes it out of my throat, which simply vibrates under his fingers.

All of the trepidation I’d felt at the idea of being choked has transformed into potent, mind-bending need as I teeter on a ledge I can’t see, held aloft only by my faith in this man. Truthfully, if he killed me in the moment, I’d only be mad that I missed out on what’s promising to be the most devastating orgasm I’ve ever had.

“You followed me into the fire, Claire.” Remy groans as he hits deeper inside of me. His voice is composed despite the fact that his motions are becoming frantic, chasing me further to the edge of the precipice I can’t see. The stars are getting brighter as I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, my heart slamming as I take a short breath through my nose, letting the acrid feeling marinate in my lungs.

Every part of me feels like it’s going to burst—my head from the impossible pleasure, my chest from the pressure building inside it. I’m only vaguely aware of his other arm reaching around me, supporting my weight across my hips and pulling me into him, limiting my range of motion so that I’m hostage to his every movement.

The pressure in my lower body doubles and a scream finally makes it past his fingers on my throat before he adjusts his grip, giving me a few brief seconds to gulp down precious air. It temporarily transfers all of the sensation to the strong arm pressing against my bladder, snatching me against him and I feel the unraveling begin when his hot mouth presses into the shell of my ear.

“Now burn with me.” He commands.

I do.

The minute his fingers close on my throat again, everything burns.

I’ve been burning for him since the first moment I saw him. I *still* burn for him, brighter and hotter than even the first day. A flame left previously untended; it now stands to ravage everything in its path. There’s no stopping it.

White-hot waves roll off my skin as I begin to shake, distantly aware of the violent power taking over me. It’s not much of a warning—it comes too late. I’m already being ripped apart by the impending explosion ricocheting through me from the inside out.

My legs are the first to give—they begin to tremble and then give out beneath me, so that I feel myself falling even though I know I’m upright, even though I know he won’t let me go.

That’s when Remy re-doubles his efforts, letting his hand slip away from my throat so he can reach down between my legs. My breath—newly rushing back to me—catches when his fingers graze over my throbbing core. The touch is too much on my sensitive nerves, but I grind against him anyway, greedy for what he’s offering.

“Fuck.”

He hums it in my ear—one long, low breath of approval, of appreciation. “I never would have guessed you were so needy.”

I can practically feel the curve of his lips, smiling, as he presses them against my neck.

I open my mouth to tell him that he’s making me this way, but no words come out. Just as I’m trying to remember how to get my tongue to move to form them, he grabs my clit between two fingers, pinching it ruthlessly.

It’s a scream that leaves my mouth in the end when he finds his release and demands my own. It’s primal, it’s raw, and it’s full of every ounce of pain and pleasure he’s given me tonight. I’m pretty sure they could hear it downstairs, but I don’t have the energy to care. It is only quieted when he seizes my chin and yanks me around to face him.

As the pulsing in my core eases and his strokes slow, he crushes his mouth against mine and possesses my mouth—the last thing he can take, since my body is thoroughly his now.

I lose myself in the kiss—if you can even call it that. I think he may be trying to steal my soul through my chest, dominating my mouth even after

he pulls out of me, covering my lips with a bruising kiss.

The minute he lets go of me, I fall into the bed and try to catch my breath.

Every part of me is sore, raw, and too tired to move.

And I’ve never felt better.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Claire is so exhausted she falls into the sheets the moment I release my grip on her, and I don’t blame her. I certainly put her through her paces. I wasn’t sure how far she was willing to take the idea of being hurt, and while my palms had itched to smack across the beautiful curves of her ass until her flesh was as hot as her pussy, I restrained myself.

I didn’t make love to her either. It was tantric, raw, violent yet mutual.

And so fucking good.

Claire isn’t the first woman who has asked for me to get a little rough. But she’s the first who has ever made me feel like a god, giving me herself so completely, letting me control her body as effortlessly as if she were a puppet whose strings were twined through my fingers. It’s addicting, watching her toes curl and her cheeks flush, seeing the way her chest catches when she holds her breath like she’s too busy focusing on the pleasure to worry about such trivial things. I’m not sure which is the greater high—watching her face as she comes apart or feeling her sweet little pussy quiver desperately around me.

It’s weird, the sensation that floods me in the wake of my release. When I withdraw from her, she’s lying on her side, entirely at ease, not bothering to hide any part of herself from my view.

I brush her hair over her shoulder so I can look at her face and try to figure out whether she’s feeling the same strange emotions I am, and that’s when I see her eyes are heavy, fluttering closed. She graces me with a sleepy smile, but her eyes are hardly open enough to see me.

The chaos in my head only deepens as she falls asleep on my bed.

She slept here before, when I was too fucked up to let her out of my sight. That was the first inkling I had that I was in trouble. That suspicion has only proven itself to be truer than I'd initially thought. Rhea's blessing was hardly necessary, but it has definitely helped me feel less guilty for the wicked thoughts I have of her best friend. And now that those wicked thoughts have become reality, I'm not sure I'll ever be the same once she's gone. Even the thought of leaving her now to go downstairs and check on my guests, feels like a herculean effort. But business never stops, and I'm not going to miss my opportunity to catch Davos just to lay here next to her and contemplate my feelings.

I brush my knuckles over her neck just to be sure she's breathing, and ease when I feel her pulse ebbing under the surface. A small sound leaves her throat; It's dangerously close to her encouraging sounds of pleasure and makes it even harder to pull away. A small part of me hopes she'll stay sleeping, so that I at least have a chance to do what I don't want to. The greater part of me wants to wake her with my lips on hers and get back to it. Even though I know she's tired, I'm not. I'm awake with the blood still rushing through my veins.

Claire doesn't stir as I dress, nor when I draw the sheet over her. I hate leaving her at all, let alone leaving her vulnerable, so I lock the door from the inside and hope that by the time I get back up here, she's ready for more.

When I get downstairs, the crowd has thinned, and I quickly mutter my appreciation for that. I'd intended my sister to be able to help field some of the condolences being delivered en masse, but I worked out most of my frustration on Claire already. I feel refreshed and oddly chipper—too chipper, given the circumstances. This is my father's wake and there are people watching. I need to reign it in.

"Remy!" I hear my name from across the room and look up to see Elaine fixing me with a desperate look in her wide eyes. There's a man next to her who looks oddly familiar—middle aged, attractive to the kind of women who are into the perfectly polished sort of guy who I'm willing to bet spends more time on his hair than they do. I don't doubt he's used to getting what he wants, which begs the question… what *does* he want?

"Elaine." I offer her a smile and then turn to the man. "You look familiar. Don't tell me, you worked with my father."

“Everyone worked with Jonathan Boudreaux.” The man laughs, but he appears tense, and the way his eyes flick to Elaine tells me she’s the source of his irritation.

“This is Senator Victor Massarini.” Elaine says, gesturing to the man at her side without taking her eyes off of me. Her smile is tight, uncomfortable. But Elaine pulls no punches. She’s not afraid to be honest, so if the senator was bothering her, I doubt she’d hesitate to tell him as much.

“Senator?” I feign surprise, as if he doesn’t look like the Webster’s dictionary definition of a politician. “What state?”

“Washington.” He smiles, but it’s not genuine. It’s hollow, distracted.

“Well, I guess that’s why you look familiar. My father got on famously with politicians.” I reach out a hand to shake and after a moment of hesitation, he does the same.

“Your father got on famously with mine.” Victor amends, fixing me with a look that suggests he knows more than he can publicly say about what our fathers had in common.

Interesting.

“I have to take some cookies out of the oven.” Elaine says, glancing at her wrist, which has never, as long as I’ve known her, had a watch there. She offers our guest a stilted wave and then with her back to him, mouths ‘thank you’.

I offered her an escape, but now I’m stuck entertaining the senator for an indefinite amount of time. I glance around, hoping to spot Wes or his abominable father. It’s been a few years since I last saw Davos, but once you’ve stood toe-to-toe with the devil, you’re not likely to forget what he looks like.

He isn’t here.

“Washington to Costa Rica is a long way to travel for a wake.”

“I was here on business. Figured I’d take the opportunity to make sure the devil was really dead.” The senator is ambiguously blunt, leaving just enough of a lilt to his words that he could start laughing and tell me that’s a joke. But he doesn’t. I know exactly how he feels about my father, and though it’s akin to the hatred I held for him, I can’t figure out why he’d be telling me this.

“The state of Washington has business in Costa Rica?” I muse, knowing damn well that’s not what he meant. Victor knows too, but he just laughs.

“Personal business. I’ve got an investment opportunity I’m pursuing.” He shrugs, and I’m about to write it off as irrelevant when he switches tack, leaning into me with interest in his eyes. “There was a girl here earlier… blonde with eyes like the sea.”

I know he’s talking about Claire even before he describes her. I feel my spine go stiff at the mention of her, and I’m preparing to tell him I’m not sure who he’s referring to when he continues. “She said her name was Claire Monroe and that she was a friend of the family.”

So much for feigning ignorance. I turn and scan the crowd again, hoping he can’t see the instant anger he ignited inside of me. I don’t know who this Massarini is, but his interest in Claire is disturbing. He’s old enough to be her father, and the fact that he felt comfortable enough to ask me about her in the same breath as mentioning an investment opportunity makes my gut twist. I spot a member of the catering staff with drinks on his tray and gesture him over, taking a tumbler of whiskey on the rocks and sipping it as casually as I can. In my head, I’m already plotting Massarini’s death. I wonder if Claire will join me again.

He waits, somewhat impatiently, as I take a sip of the drink and then sigh my approval of the taste, as if I’m uninterested in the conversation. “Claire is a friend of the family.” I shrug, repeating Claire’s earlier sentiment.

“How long has she been a friend of the family?” Victor asks eagerly.

I can feel the presence of the caterer next to me, still waiting with his tray like he expects me to take another. Or maybe offer him some sort of tip. Victor seems to sense him too, because he takes a glass off the tray, musters a smile, and sends him on his way.

“Years.” I shrug and gesture to his drink. “I’d love to know what you think, Senator.”

It takes him a moment to understand what I’m asking before he peers down at his glass like he expects it to jump out at him. When his eyes turn up to me, I nod, so he takes a tentative sip. His face smooths out, his unease gone as he realizes he actually likes the drink. “Smooth.” He says, nodding approvingly.

“That whiskey was aged in a wine barrel for the last four years.” I tell him. “It’s from my private selection.”

“It’s good.” He says quickly. “So, what can you tell me about her?”

I know he’s talking about Claire again, and the thought makes me want to smash both my glass and his over his head. “My distillery? It’s a passion

project rather than a financial pursuit, but—”

“No,” Victor raises a hand to stop me. “I mean the girl. Claire. What do you know about her? Where did she come from?”

I bite back the childish impulse to tell him she came from her mother, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension that’s building there. “Claire’s great.” I tell him, “But I’m not going to give anyone her bio without her permission.”

The senator’s mouth opens a little like he’s about to speak, but the only word that comes from his mouth is “But—” and then he’s cut off by the addition of a new party to our conversation.

“Wes,” I clap him on the back. “So good of you to join us.”

Wes’ eyes glower even as he grins, turning on the charm for Massarini. “I’ve been looking for you.” He says, just lightly enough that it can be construed as a friendly statement. Next to him, the man Dimitri hired to play Wes’ keeper stands with his arms crossed and his jaw set. I’m sure Wes has cut his teeth on torturing the poor guy tonight.

“I’ve been around.” I assure him. “Have you met Senator Massarini?”

“Senator?” Wes harumphs, crossing his arms.

“Victor,” The senator extends his hand, but Wes leaves him hanging to appraise him coolly.

“Wes is my ill-mannered half-brother.” I say, hoping that tidbit is enough to distract him from asking about Claire anymore.

I think it works cause the way the senator looks at me is like his brain is short-circuiting. “Half-brother? As in…”

“As in our whore mother fucked my father and then left us to start over with Jonathan.” Wes grins. “But family always find each other, you know?”

“Yeah…” The senator muses, and then realizing he was staring, snaps his mouth shut. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Speaking of your father,” I say, casting another glance around the room. “Where is he?”

“Who’s to say?” Wes shrugs. “I’m sure he’ll show eventually.”

“One would think.” I shrug too and turn to clap the senator on the shoulder. “It was nice to meet you, Senator. I’m going to go mingle.”

Both of them try to say something to me, but I ignore them both as I walk away. Some part of me warns against leaving Wes with Victor, where he will say God-only-knows-what. But I have to check in with Dimitri, figure

out what Elaine's problem with the senator is, and keep an eye out for Davos or any of his sycophants.

I find Elaine first, standing in the kitchen with her hands braced on the edge of the sink, her head bent as if she's studying whatever is in there. But as I draw closer to her, I realize there's nothing in the sink and her eyes are closed. She startles as I step up to her, and I wonder if she really still thinks I'm capable of hurting Claire. Granted, I *did* hurt her, though not in the way Elaine is worried about. I've been on her shit list nearly from the moment I brought Claire here, and now she's acting jumpy around me. "What's going on?" I demand.

Elaine blinks, pressing her lips together. "What?"

"What's going on?" I repeat myself. "You haven't been yourself for a while. I know you've been under a lot of stress, but I've never seen you this on edge."

"I'm just tired." She manages to smile, but her eyes don't get the memo. "It's been a long day."

"A long few weeks." I amend, waiting for her fervent nod to continue. "Especially ever since the girls came here." I notice the way her lips press together even as her brows lift, betraying her lack of confusion. She knows exactly what I'm getting at, even if she won't tell me.

"It's just the change and the stress of planning the funeral and then the wake. And I've been coordinating with Lionel for the will reading on Monday, so…"

"What's the deal with the senator?"

"I guess I worked for his family before." She sighs. "He seemed to want to try and catch up on twenty years or something. Kept following me around."

It's not unlikely, but something about the way she says all of that strikes me as strange. I decide to let it go, just in time, because my phone chimes with a new text. I slip it out of my pocket and step away, giving Elaine space as I read the message.

I do a double take at the name on the screen and then jam my finger against the screen to get the message to open.

Jovich:

Enjoy your whore while you still can. Her breaths are numbered.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I don’t remember falling asleep. I don’t remember anything after feeling like my soul had been ripped out of my body, taking all of the hurt, the chaos, the pain with it. I only remember a moment of bliss following that, and then I wake suddenly.

I’m not sure, at first, what pulled me out of a sleep like death.

The room is lit only by a lamp in the corner, which casts a gentle glow through the darkness. I know where I am—I know this is Remy’s room, and I know that I’m alone. And then I hear it—the rattling of a doorknob that’s locked. I bolt upright and glance at the door, my heart pounding furiously in my chest. Something about waking up to someone trying to come into this room, where I’m naked beneath a sheet, sends immediate alarm bells going off in my head.

Do I stay quiet? Do I ask who is on the other side?

I glance around the room, looking for anything I can use in defense if it comes down to it. I’m just reaching for a heavy book on Remy’s nightstand when the doorknob shakes one last time, and then I hear the sound of footsteps retreating.

Relief washes over me, and I put it down to a drunk guest looking for the bathroom.

As if reminded by that thought, my bladder twists in need, so I gather the sheet around myself and make my way to Remy’s bathroom without turning on the light. I don’t know if I should feel dirty considering he fucked me thoroughly and then ran out, but I suppose it’s better than kicking me out.

Besides, I can’t bring myself to feel shameful or wrong when I feel this damn good. I don’t know how long I’ve been asleep for, but it had to have been hours because I feel recharged in spite of my physical exhaustion… I don’t know the last time I’ve felt this way.

I doubt Remy is afraid of the dark—I doubt he’s afraid of anything really—but he has a single nightlight plugged into the wall by the counter. I’m grateful for its light to drive out the darkness as my eyes are still adjusting, and it illuminates everything enough that I find the toilet without incident. I silently applaud him on shutting the lid—half the men I’ve lived with never managed to grasp the concept.

It's not until I wrap the sheet around myself again and go to wash my hands that I reach for the light switch. When I do, the sense of peace that had blanketed me before disappears entirely as a figure appears behind me. I spin around so fast I nearly slam my head into the door frame. My scream is hoarse, fading out in the middle, and I think my heart’s about to jump ship. Thank God I just peed, or I’d be soaking Remy’s sheet right now, and not in the good way.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” Remy says, though he’s grinning a bit despite his claim. He’s all dressed in his suit again, though the tie has been loosened and his jacket is draped across his arm. While I think he’s telling the truth about not meaning to scare me, I think he’s certainly enjoying seeing me flustered.

“Well, you did.” I snap, letting out a shaky breath. My voice is gravelly, so I clear my throat and cross my arms over the front of the sheet.

“Did you think I was a ghost?” He teases, stepping closer so that my back presses against the counter. His eyes are playful, but I can see the heat in them as he assesses me, and it ignites the heat in me.

“I thought you were a demon from the mirror dimension.” I tell him, and then wince when I realize how weird that probably sounded. My brain feels scrambled, like it can’t latch onto anything that would make sense right now. The way he’s looking at me certainly doesn’t help.

“The mirror dimensions?” He muses, stepping directly in front of me now, so that I couldn’t go anywhere if I tried. All I manage is a small response to that, some noncommittal noise like a hum. My heart is still beating fast, but this time it’s not with fear… it’s working overtime to send blood to my extremities. I can feel it rushing to the apex between my thighs, desire spreading out from my core and spilling like liquid warmth in my

stomach. “I’m interested in this mirror dimension.” He murmurs, lifting my chin in his fingers so that his eyes can lock on mine. “I’d love to fuck you in it so that I could watch you come apart from every angle.”

I suck in a breath and promptly end up choking on it.

All of my bravado from earlier, my brazenness, my seductress persona, is gone. Earlier I felt like I was in control, if only a little. But right now, with him looking at me like he wants to absolutely devour me, I don’t have the slightest illusion of it. The corners of his lips tip upward once I’ve gotten a handle on myself. “It seems you’d like that too.” He croons, swiping his thumb slowly across my bottom lip, parting it from the top.

I’m rendered speechless. Even if my brain *could* grasp onto a coherent thought right now, I wouldn’t be able to make my vocal cords work or convince my tongue to move. I simply stare at him, sure that there’s not enough air in this bathroom to breathe when the sight of him steals the oxygen from my veins.

Realizing he’s not getting an answer from me, he tries again, swiping my hair behind my ear so that he can press his mouth gently against it. “Would you like that, Claire? To watch me fuck you from every angle?”

I’ve never been so close to the edge from words alone, but I feel myself clenching around nothing, desperate and needy. My legs go shaky, and I’m grateful for the support of the counter behind me. “Yes.” I manage. It’s part moan and part whimper, all I can squeak out around the need that’s suffocating me.

Every cell in my body is screaming for this man, aching for the sweet pleasure that I know he can give me. Disappointment floods me like a cool wave when he steps away from me, smirking. It’s short-lived, because in one swift movement, he tugs the sheet away from where I’ve knotted it at the chest, leaving me exposed. If I wasn’t already giving myself away, my nipples certainly would—they’ve already been coaxed into points by my desire, but they harden under his gaze and the cool air.

Remy throws his jacket through the open door, where it lands somewhere on his bedroom floor, but I’m more focused on the way he stares at me as he pulls his tie off from around his neck. “Let’s call it your lucky day.” He says, flinging the tie at the counter. It lands in the sink on the far side. “You see, I remodeled this place after the original house. And one thing that I kept—one thing that made no sense—is the closet doors.” He tips his head behind him but doesn’t break stride in unbuttoning his shirt and I’m too

eager for him to lose it to tear my eyes away and look at whatever he was indicating. “My father hated them. He called it tacky, but I remember how my mother would pull these doors out. She was obsessed with looking perfect, of course, so she’d angle them just right to be sure that there were no flaws in her appearance. God forbid a stray hair put a crack in the façade my parents so painstakingly crafted.” He shrugs out of his shirt and lets it drop to the floor without ceremony.

I still haven’t quite figured out what he’s talking about—it’s hard to focus when I’m too busy thinking about those thick arms wrapping around me again, his hands on my throat. But when he turns, I finally tear my eyes away from him to see what he means.

I didn’t notice them before since I walked by them in relative darkness. The closet is past the toilet and shower, occupying most of the far wall, and the doors are made of frameless panes of glass, floor-to-damn-near-ceiling. In one of the homes I stayed in when I was younger, the closet I shared with another foster kid had the same sort of mirrors. In the dead of night when I’d wake to the reflection of passing high beams, that mirror always scared the shit out of me. But as Remy walks toward the closet now, his pants low on his hips and the perfect musculature of his back on full display in the mirror behind him, I am only intrigued.

He reaches a hand up and pops the first door open, leaving the bifold angled so that it throws my reflection back at me. I can also see the reflection of the back of my head, my hair falling in wild waves down my bare back. It’s a weird sensation, to simultaneously see myself in multiple angles. When he props the other door open at the same angle, it tosses that reflection back at the other. Remy grins as he crosses back to me and, in one swift movement, scoops me up with his hands under my ass and sets me on the counter, immediately fitting himself between my legs.

I feel exposed in an entirely new way as he unthreads his belt and slips out of his boxers. He’s tall enough that even with me propped up between the sinks, the cold marble beneath my ass, his hips align perfectly with me. His cock is already hard, and as he pushes my knees further apart, it doesn’t escape me that he can probably see just how wet I am too, how much I want him to take me right here and now.

But he doesn’t fist himself or step closer—he hooks his arms under my knees and drags me closer to the edge of the counter, so close that I worry for a second that I’ll slip right off. I throw my hands out to catch the

surface, just in case, but I should know better. He doesn't let me fall—he hooks my legs over his shoulders, opening me more for him. The last thing I see before he dives into tonguing my pussy is a smirk, and it lives there a moment as I squeeze my eyes shut, overcome by the sudden sensation of his tongue laving at me. With one long stroke, from damn-near my ass all the way up to my clit, he turns me into a desperate mess. My moan is unhinged and uninhibited as I try to maintain control and refrain from pushing into him.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, raking them against his scalp, and throw my head back as his breath whispers over me, full of anticipation. "Remy," I moan, too impatient. He's just lit a match and then stepped back instead of tending the flame, and I can't tame the need in me.

"Open your eyes," he says, his fingers flexing on my thighs.

I do as he says, blinking away the blurry fog from squeezing them shut so tightly. He looks every bit the god I've always seen him as, his chin tilted up at me, his eyes smoldering like the reflection of fire I see in the colors. I can see a small reflection of myself—so desperate, and not the least bit ashamed by it.

"If you want me to fuck you," he swipes a finger over my slit, collecting my wetness on two of his fingers, and then back down, sliding along the place where I want him with a teasing touch. It's not enough friction, not in the right place, but it's enough to leave me feeling weak. With every downward stroke, I feel myself growing wetter. If I moved right now, I don't doubt that I'd have left a spot on the counter, but I can't bring myself to care. It feels too fucking good. "With my tongue or otherwise, I'm going to need you to watch yourself. I want you to see just how devastating you look when you shatter on my tongue. And if you do a good job of that, then I'll let you see how you come on my cock. Hmm?"

Fuck. I want him every way I can take him, but right now I'm desperate to slip onto his cock and have him fill me. I grip his hair tighter, my fingers tangling near his scalp as I try to restrain myself, and nod. When he doesn't look away, I realize he's waiting for me to agree, so I nod, earning a crooked grin. "Good. Grip the counter."

I barely have time to realize what he's saying before I'm doing it. It's like my body is trained to act on his command.

Ceasing his petting, he lifts his fingers to my lips, painting them with my own wetness, slow and sensual. Before I can even contemplate how I

should react to that, he turns his attention back to my core and I turn my attention to the mirrors on the wall.

It's unspeakably hot, not just because I can see him between my legs from a half dozen different angles, but because I can see the back of his head as it dips between my legs and his tongue lashes out at my clit without any preamble.

It's not going to be long before I do exactly what he wants me to. I could probably shatter right now if he really wanted me to, but I'm holding out because I don't want it to be over yet.

This is heaven—I'm convinced. All of my earlier fears about burning in hell for what we did are gone without a trace, because there's no world in which you could fear hell when you've experienced this. It's more than a fair enough trade. I'd sell my soul—or what's left of it—to live in this moment for eternity.

The fingers that he just dragged over my lips sink into me without warning. It's not a conscious decision for me to clench around him like I'm desperate to keep him there. His tongue doesn't even cease its work as he pulls my clit into his mouth entirely, eliciting a scream from me when he sucks it gently. I squeeze my eyes shut at the sudden explosion of pleasure, and then promptly open them again to find my reflection.

"God," I moan. Right now, this bathroom is my church—a place to worship and be worshipped in turn.

I take my bottom lip between my teeth, trying desperately to maintain control. But the earlier taste of myself on my tongue—light and faintly sweet—just adds more to the fire in me, which is raging as it spreads lower and lower.

When he curves his fingers upward, hitting a spot deep inside me, the fire turns into an explosion that rocks my entire body. White-hot heat spills out from my pores, obliterating me entirely. But unlike every other time I've felt myself being shredded apart at the molecular level, I don't close my eyes. I fix my gaze on the mirrors, on the different versions of myself, and watch as I come.

I've never had an esteemed view of myself. I don't hate the way I look or who I am most of the time, but I've also never loved the way I look or who I am. I've always fallen firmly in the middle, feeling some days like a flaw in nature's design and other days feeling like I belong exactly as I am.

But in this moment, I am my own god. In this moment, I am the sea and the sky, the moon, and the stars. I am everything that is right and good in the world, and I'm the reason it all exists. I don't know if his goal was to make me feel like I've created universes and life, but it does. Because in this moment, I feel like this release is the only thing in the world that matters.

It's so consuming that I don't immediately notice that he's drinking my release until I see his throat bob, my juices flowing out from around his lips as the pressure returns low in my stomach, an immediate need for a second release building. His tongue swipes the underside of my clit with his sucking.

A second orgasm right now would surely kill me, and yet I can't get the words to tell him to stop. I don't want him to, even though it's starting to be too much, the sensitivity reaching the point of hysteria. I cry out, trying to pull away from him before a second explosion shatters me too well to ever put the pieces back together.

Remy seems to take the hint, letting go of me and sucking in a breath like he's deprived himself of air for the pleasure of taking every last drop I had to give. My arms fall to my sides, exhausted from holding so tight to the edge of the counter as he stretches back to his full height, boxing me in between his thick arms as he braces his hands on the counter. I focus on the thick cords of muscle wrapping around his forearms for a minute, trying to catch my breath before he can lock eyes with me and steal it all over again.

He does steal it, though not in the way I expect. When he grips my chin, it's to jerk it upward, forcing my head to tilt back. His eyes still smolder, though this time he's the one looking down at me. And though I felt oddly indestructible when I was being torn asunder just seconds ago, the way he looks at me feels like a wrecking ball to the chest.

And that's got nothing on the way he kisses me, hard and furious, crushing his mouth against mine so forcefully I think it may bruise… not that I care.

He could steal my soul out of my own body right now and I wouldn't care, because I've already given it to him.

I'm so fucked.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Claire protested the shower at first, claiming that she'd go shower when she had something to change into. She relented when I told her I wanted to take care of her. I also think she got a glimpse of herself and decided she needed to wash up.

She looked absolutely beautiful, covered in a thin sheen of sweat, her lips swollen from my kiss, her hair mussed and her pussy still glistening for me. In fact, I've never seen anything more devastating, but I know her ass has to be aching from being pressed into my countertop, and I definitely made a mess of her sweet cunt, both earlier and more recently. If she's not sore after all that, she's either got the pain tolerance of a sailor or she's an Oscar-worthy actress.

I guide her under the spray in the center of the shower, while she watches me with a guarded expression. "I do have a little self-control." I tell her mockingly. "I'm not going to jump you right now."

That gets a laugh from her, and she lifts her hands to guide the water through her hair. "I trust you." She assures me, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me into the spray with her.

Water cascades around us, dripping from my hair and running down my face onto hers. "You do?"

Something about that admission puts a lump in my throat. I should be glad that she trusts me. I want her to feel safe with me because she absolutely is. I've already killed for her, and I'd do it again without a second of hesitation. I've also already come to the terrifying conclusion that

I'd die for her even though we'll never manage to be anything more than friends who once benefitted—okay, a couple of times—benefitted from a connection to my sister.

And yet, I'm getting threats to her life from a fucking ghost. Can I keep her safe from that?

"Was that not clear when I literally put my life in your hands?" She teases, laughing. "I've never been choked before."

"I sure hope not," I tell her sincerely, "because I'd have to kill anyone who has ever done that to you. In fact, I think I'll have to kill any man who's ever laid a hand on you, whether you wanted him to or not."

Claire's eyes go wide at that, her mouth opening to protest. The sight of her lips like that is too much. I press mine to them and steal a gentle kiss, pulling away before she even gets the chance to kiss me back. I stay close enough to her, though, that the words I speak next whisper across her lips. "I do hope it's a short list. Murder is tiresome."

When she doesn't say anything, I laugh. "I'm kidding, Claire. Relax."

It takes a moment for her laughter to follow, but after a moment she grins, and a hesitant chuckle escapes her. "That's not funny."

I can tell she's uncomfortable with being amused by my wry sense of humor, but she can't deny that it hits her the same way it does me. We're two peas in a fucked up little pod, which is why we'd never work out. But we *can* work our frustration out on one another—we're really fucking good at that, apparently.

Claire reaches for the shampoo bottle, but I take it from her before she can open it and dispense a small amount into my palm before lathering them together. She's confused at first, and then begins to protest when I tell her to turn. "I can do this mys—"

"I told you I want to take care of you." I cut her off, nodding my head in the direction of the shower wall. She turns like the good girl she is, but her hesitation doesn't melt until I've soaped her hair up and begun dragging my fingers against her scalp.

"Mmm." She sighs, her head lilting to the side a bit as the tension leaves her body.

"Careful making noises like that…" I warn, silently scolding my still-hard cock as it twitches at the little noise of surrender. "I told you I can control myself, but if you go making those sexy little sounds, I may have to excuse myself."

Claire stills at that, though the way she tilts her head back toward me lets me know she's still very much enjoying the moment. It's not until I reach for the hand-held attachment and begin to rinse the suds out of her hair that she makes any more noise. Whatever it is, I don't catch the words well enough to make sense of them until she turns.

"It's not a long list."

It takes a second to remember what I'd said about hoping it was a short list of men who'd ever touched her, and once I do, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say in response. It's truly none of my business—I'm not exactly an altar boy—and she's in college. As long as she's clean, her sexual liberties are her own. And yet, I feel an odd possessiveness in my chest, a jealousy at the thought of her wanting any other man. "How many?"

Claire swallows, looking suddenly nervous. "You already know about one."

"Yes." I agree darkly. "And what's left of him was buried below sea level and has probably been turned into shark shit by now."

When she winces, I clear my throat, realizing maybe that was an overshare. "He deserved every bit of what happened to him in this life *and* whatever hell has the misfortune of receiving him."

That gets her to soften, but I can tell she's still nervous as she shifts on her feet, so I grab the body wash and pour some in my hands, letting her take her time. I motion for her to turn back around and this time, she does so without hesitation.

I'm massaging the soap into her shoulders when she speaks again. "There's only been one other."

I still with my hands on her, processing the information she just handed to me. I've never kept track of my body count—not the ones I've fucked or the ones I've killed—but it sure as hell surpasses *one*. Hell, combined, my body count could probably wrap around the moon, but I wasn't ready to reveal either of those things to Claire yet.

I turn her back to face me, studying her face for signs that she's just messing with me, but there's nothing other than the nervous biting of her lower lip as she avoids my eyes and then shrugs. "I had a guy for a bit who was sorta like a boyfriend, I guess? It was… uninspired."

All I manage is a blink, followed by what I imagine is a blank stare. "*Uninspired*?"

“Yeah. You know, very much ‘peg in the hole’, and call it done.” She covers her face with her hands and shakes her head, muttering something else that’s obstructed by her own fingers.

I nearly cringe at the description she just offered, but don’t want to prevent her from telling me whatever else is on her mind, so I suppress it and clear my throat. “*Peg in hole*?”

“Yes.”

I pry her hands away from her face, her wrists circled in my fingers, and force them down to her sides as I step closer to her. We’re pressed together now, skin to skin so that no air passes between us. Rivulets of water fall from overhead and cascade between us, pooling in the space where our bodies meet. Her nipples are hard against my skin, and my cock nestles against her warm stomach. “What does that mean?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Remy.” She laughs. “Do you need a diagram?”

I don’t think there’s a single thing that she’d look bad in, but I discovered the other day that red is a good color on Claire. And she seems to enjoy it as well, judging by how often she turns that lovely shade of scarlet, wearing her embarrassment like a badge. When I don’t say anything, she seems to understand I’m not relenting. “I mean it was very much ‘1940’s let’s consummate our marriage’ missionary.”

I can’t help laughing at that description. “Do you have something against missionary?”

“No…” She shrugs. “But it’s also a far cry from ‘just fucked in the blood of our victim and now we’re going to ravage each other’ missionary.”

There’s no remorse in her voice this time, though there is the slightest bit of hesitation in the silence after her last word, as if she wonders whether she should feel bad about what just left her tongue. “You liked it?” I ask cautiously, rubbing a circle on her wrist with my thumb. I shouldn’t ask her to admit to it one way or another. It’s fucked up to expect her to contend with those emotions at all, let alone in a moment like this. But I want to know. I need to know.

“I know I shouldn’t.” Claire swallows, pressing her lips together for a moment. “But yes. I’ve loved every minute of when we’re together… every dirty thing we’ve done, no matter how wicked and wrong.”

I’m not sure I’ve ever heard anything so insanely sexy. My cock responds in kind, jumping against her stomach. I’m about to make an excuse or apology or tell her why we’re damning both of ourselves to hell on earth as

well as in the afterlife by continuing to play this game, but her hands grip my ass and before I realize what's happening, she sinks to her knees on the shower floor and blinks up at me.

Instinct guides my hands to her hair, where I thread my fingers. I've been aching to be back inside of her from the moment I pulled out of her, but I am more than capable of taking care of myself. "You don't have to do that."

"You saw my own cum on my lips. Don't you want to see yours there too?"

Fuuuuck.

Okay, that's the new sexiest thing I've ever heard. And the answer is yes. I want to see that right now more than I've ever wanted a damn thing in my life. And Claire is happy to oblige.

I made her keep her eyes open when she came for me, so I do the same, looking down at the top of her head as she sticks her tongue out and laves at the underside of my shaft, her tongue flat and wet and warm against me. My balls tighten, and I grip her hair tighter in response, siphoning some of the tension out of me. I've been hard from the moment I started walking back to my room thinking of all the things I wanted to do to her in the time we agreed upon, and I know I can't hold on long, my pride be damned. Just one lick is enough to fill me with heat, so when she wraps her mouth around my cock, stretching her pretty lips around me completely, I know I'm about to be a goner.

"Fuck, Claire." I whisper, watching as she slowly works me in her mouth, taking me to the base before her tongue curls around me, her throat closing in protest. Not to be discouraged, she only retreats a little, releasing the suction but keeping her tongue on me so that her saliva drips from her mouth. When she re-doubles her efforts, she does it in one swift motion, pushing herself deeper onto me before letting her tongue swirl around my cock.

She's the most delicious thing I've ever seen, and the only thing that could make her any more irresistible in this moment is seeing her covered in my cum. It's a weird possessiveness I've never felt before, a kink I've never had time to care about since my relations are usually driven by need rather than straight desire. And yet, I have to force myself to stay still and let her explore, because if I don't, I'm worried I'll scare her off. Though if I've learned anything about this woman, it's that she doesn't scare easily.

She’s a marvel to watch, but I can’t do it anymore. I close my eyes when I feel the tip prod against the back of her tongue and hear the sound of her gagging on me. Some primal part of me—some wicked part of me—wants to use my grip on her hair to take control of her movements, but I suck in a breath instead and languish in her sweet hell, waiting for her to put me out of this beautiful misery.

I think she tries to say something, but it’s obviously obscured. Apparently, she never learned not to speak with a full mouth. I don’t care, whatever it is, because she picks up her pace, bobbing along my length, her lips wrapped firmly around me as my cock skates along her wet tongue, back and forth, building in intensity until I feel it building in me at a dangerous pace. “Claire—” I pant, struggling to slow it down, to give her time to figure out her next move. She was on her knees for me once already, in my office, and I stopped her. I don’t know if I can do it again, but I also don’t want to make her vomit as I’m pumping out my release. “Claire!” I try again, pulling away from her just the slightest bit.

To my surprise, she only tightens her grip on me, her nails digging into the skin of my ass as she practically swallows me in her throat. I can’t hold on anymore, and part of me thinks this is what she intended.

She reacts quickly, moving me off of her tongue just as streams of cum begin to spray out at her. She hasn’t pulled away from me entirely when her hand wraps around my shaft, encouraging the rest of my release. Thank God one of us is in control, because it sure as hell isn’t me. She works me with her hand, pumping me until I’m empty and she’s entirely covered in my seed—her neck, her breasts, her lips, which she licks clean, tentatively tasting what I’ve left on her.

It’s not even that which does me in, though. It’s the way she looks up at me, like she’s just waiting to hear that she did a good job, that is the final nail in my coffin.

I hook my arms under her elbows and pull her up to stand. Claire wobbles when I let go of her, but I steady her immediately with one hand on her hip, the other on the back of her head, as I crash my lips against hers.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

If killing together doesn’t bond a set of people, having each other’s cum on your lips must. We’re both quiet the rest of the shower once I finally get my mouth away from his. It’s a peaceful sort of quiet, not awkward or stilted, as we both contemplate our own thoughts. I let him wash me, and when I wrap the towel around myself and make for the bedroom door, he catches my hand in his and pulls me back. “Stay.”

My mouth opens of its own volition. “We agreed to one time, and we’ve far surpassed that.”

“We agreed to one *night*.” He says, stepping closer to me and tucking a strand of still-damp hair behind my ear. “And I want every minute of it.”

I’m not sure there are words sufficient for the feelings waging war inside me, but ‘no’ absolutely isn’t it. I can’t turn down that request, not when it came so sweetly from those lips that have been all over me tonight, and especially not when he looks at me like that. “I can’t. I—”

“I’m not asking for anything more, Claire. I just want you to sleep next to me.”

It seems like such an odd request, given that we’ve established boundaries beyond the boundaries we already blew to smithereens, but I’m too disarmed to say no. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“What a shame…” He says slowly, sounding none-too-bothered by that predicament. When I swat him playfully in the arm, he breaks into a grin and crosses to his dresser, digging a worn T shirt from one of the drawers

and holding it between us with a little bit of reluctance. “You slept nude earlier.”

“Earlier wasn’t a choice.” I laugh, though I can’t deny I’m turned on by the thought of lying next to him all night without anything between us. The reality, I’m sure, wouldn’t be as sexy. I toss and turn too much to be comfortable with the sheets rubbing back and forth across my nipples.

“Fine.” He sighs dramatically as I take the shirt from him, so I throw him a bone and let my towel drop without turning around as I drag the shirt over my head. It barely covers my ass, and as he’s reaching for a fresh pair of boxers for me, I tell him not to bother and then dash over to his bed, diving quickly under the sheets. Something about sleeping without bottoms feels even more illicit than sleeping entirely nude, and I certainly don’t want any obstructions if he chooses to wake me up with a little bit of foreplay.

When I look back at him, it’s to see him lick his lips, almost like it’s an unconscious thought, and then he drops his towel and runs like I did, diving onto the bed right next to me. It takes a moment before he draws the sheets over his waist, but when he does, he turns to me with a grin that’s more smile than smirk. There’s something oddly genuine, oddly vulnerable, about the moment. And then he leans over to turn the light off.

For a moment, my voice sticks in my throat as I contemplate asking him to leave it on. I’m sure it would be weird for him to sleep with a perfectly unreasonable amount of light in the room, but I also don’t have any doubts that he’d do it if I asked. I also don’t have any doubts that I’ve never been safer than I am with him.

When I was younger, I was scared that the monsters of the world would come to me in the dark—whether they came to me from under my bed, a mirror across from where I slept, or the room across the hall. I’m old enough to know that monsters exist in the light, too. But this man has held my life in his hands. He’s pulled me from the darkness and carried me into a darkness of another kind. He’s worshipped me and desecrated me, and I’ve never felt so inexorably connected to someone.

Underlying all of the serotonin and the sense of peace is the smallest seed of negativity. It’s reality, waiting for a chance to shake me awake and ruin whatever spell we’re under.

I push it down as easily as Remy flips off the light switch. No sooner do I manage that, than he pats the space next to him.

The nightlight from the bathroom offers me all I need—especially because with the closet doors still bent, the reflection is magnified. I know what he's suggesting even though he's dimly lit. I draw closer to him, resting my head in the crook of his arm, breathing in the smell of the soap we both showered with, hearing his heartbeat as it reaches the ear I've pressed against his chest. He doesn't wrap his arm around me, doesn't close me in, and yet as I drift off to sleep, I feel entirely encompassed by him.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I think some people would call this a walk of shame, sneaking through the hall in the dark wearing a man’s clothes with my own stuffed in my arms. But I have no shame—not even a little—as I sneak out of Remy’s room, leaving him still sound asleep in the darkness. I don’t know what time it is, but the house is quiet, and I feel confident that everyone is still sleeping. My thoughts drift to Rhea as I glance at her door, wondering if she made herself sick last night.

That idea does send a little guilt through me. Was I fucking her brother all night while she had her head in the toilet? I probably should have left the wake when she did, if only to keep her company on the bathroom floor all night. We’ve drifted apart just a little these last few weeks, and as much as it hurts to consider, it’s both a blessing and a curse. I yearn for the sister I had before we left the states, but I am happy to see her thriving without my constant presence in her life. Of course, Rhea was never the one I was truly worried about. Of course she’ll be fine in the real world. It’s me who doesn’t know how to exist without her. And to make matters worse, now I don’t know how I’m supposed to exist without Remy, too.

I went into this trip with the knowledge that my best friend’s older brother was mysterious, sexy, flirtatious, and oddly comforting. From the first moment I saw him, I had a school-girl crush—the innocent yet obsessive kind that makes you blush in their presence. We played a little game of push and pull, and then we were bonded by something heavier than the mutual attraction we both seemed to feel from the start. That bond still

exists, but the weight of it has eased, so we grew comfortable enough to begin playing with fire.

I know I'm going to get burned when we go home. Remy lives in Costa Rica, and I'm here on a passport that I don't even know the validity of. In a few more weeks, Rhea and I will go back to our apartment, back to classes and ordering take-out, and in the winter, I will visit her hometown for the last time. The inevitability of it all is stark, looming in the distance, but it's all a problem for another time.

Leaving Remy will hurt because it will mean abandoning what could have been, if things had gone differently. It will mean acknowledging that my position in life is tied to my best friend's, and in the absence of that, I have nothing. Those thoughts could eat me alive if I let them, just like thoughts of his inevitable rejection could destroy me if I give them the space to.

But I'm going to put my problems aside, the way I always have, and make the most of the time I have left like this.

When I flip on the light switch to my bathroom, I'm distinctly grateful that I woke before Remy did, and even more grateful that I didn't run into Rhea in the hall. My hair is wild, locks of it crimped and matted from falling asleep with it wet, and the makeup I forgot I was wearing yesterday which ran from my eyelashes during our shower has clumped together at random. What hasn't stayed on my lashes is below my eyes in deep, dark smudges and, I'm sure, all over Remy's pillow. But none of that is the damning part about my appearance.

The thing that sticks out the most is the light but prominent bruising on my throat—it's faint, more yellow than blue, but against my otherwise fair skin, it stands out like a brand. In a way, it is. I may not belong to Remington Boudreaux, now or ever, but it's fair to say that a part of my soul will always be his. I sacrificed it when I chose to exorcise my demons in Remy's presence, and then we consummated that after like some kind of fucked up ritual. It was never meant to be depraved; it was never meant to cement us together.

His fingerprints on my neck are like a necklace, the thumb on one side, and four small oval shapes on the other, leaving the hollow of my neck unmarred. You can hardly see them from some angles, and I don't doubt they'll heal quickly, but I can't hide in my room until they do.

I shower, washing my hair so that this time I can let it dry properly and manage to do something with it, wiping the makeup out from under my eyes and refreshing myself, trying to chase away the hangover effect of the night before. I didn't sleep much—not that I'd change that—and I'm starving, thirsty, and physically exhausted in the best possible way.

When I reach for my toothbrush, it's not in the spot where I left it. A brand new one sits on the shelf in its place, still in its plastic packaging. I'm not typically messy, but I guess Elaine must have thought me to be, because my brush has been cleaned out, too, and is on the shelf below the toothbrush. The thought of touching anything that Elaine may have messed with is unappealing, but I'm sure she didn't dip my toothbrush in arsenic since it's sealed, so I bite back my irritation and try to decide what to do about her.

Telling Remy the truth about what I learned in the hospital the other day sounds like an obvious first step, but he has no loyalty to me other than the things we did between the sheets—and in the shower, and in his office, and on the boat…

It's not until I finish brushing my teeth that I feel human again, oddly refreshed by getting myself cleaned up. It's just the marks of the night before that are keeping me from looking reasonably put together, and while I'm not ashamed of them any more than I'm ashamed of liking what he did, wearing them proudly in front of the rest of the household feels like betraying a secret that was meant to stay between Remy and I.

With my hair dried and in place, I dig through my bag looking for some sort of clip to set it over my shoulders just right, but instead I find a headband with a satin bow tied atop it. I tug at the material, testing it, before ripping it off and tying it like a necklace around my throat. Paired with a black crop top and jean shorts, it's reasonably more edgy than I've ever been, but it covers the marks well, hiding my secret in plain sight. Something about wearing the remnants of his necklace beneath this little scrap of ribbon tied flush against my throat feels wickedly sexy, and I can't help thinking of his fingers brushing my skin as he pulls it loose later.

We agreed to one night, but when he asked me to stay, I knew that one night was not enough. I think Remy craves me as I crave him, and no part of me believes that last night was the last time we'll end up together, which is why now more than ever, I need to keep up with my birth control. No good would come from being tethered together by *that*.

I’m reaching for the pack, my finger about to punch through the foil blister pack when it catches the light overhead, making me do a doubletake. A little seam runs through the back of the package; I have to drag the tip of my thumb over it to be sure it’s not simply a trick of the light. But I feel it as sure as I see it—the joining of two different foils meeting in the center.

My mouth goes dry as I flip it in my hands, taking in the pills from the front—all identical, tiny round pills no bigger than my pinky nail. There’s no sign that any of them have been tampered with, and yet from the back I can clearly see where the old backing was peeled away.

I almost drop the package, I’m shaking so much.

This is how I’ve been poisoned. I’ve been unintentionally dosing myself with some random thing I’ve never heard of because someone slipped into my room and replaced my birth control with something meant to kill me. Of course, Elaine wouldn’t poison the food and drinks that Remy and Rhea would drink. She wouldn’t take that chance on their lives. But me? I’ve been in a fog the last week since everything happened—too mentally fatigued to notice something as simple as the package I touch every day.

When I went to the hospital with the infection, Elaine had been the only one with me. She could have easily held off on calling the doctor, but she didn’t. Why would she try to kill me and then not follow through with it when the opportunity presented itself? Maybe she thought coming home to another dead body after the funeral would be too much for the Boudreaux’s, or maybe she just didn’t want to be present to witness what she did to me. I don’t know, and I don’t really care.

I have half a mind to go flush the entire package down the toilet, but before I’ve even gotten to my knees, I decide that’s not the move I want to make. I don’t know what I did to her, but it seems as though Elaine and I have gotten wrapped up in some sadistic game of chess. I can get her in check if I can prove my theory without sounding like a mad woman. Because, honestly, why would Remy believe the girl he’s just met over the woman who’s been part of his life for most of it?

Shoving the package into my back pocket, I open my door, prepared to sneak outside and call the doctor. There has to be a way to test the pills and see if they are, in fact, what was making me ill. And if they are, maybe we can tie fingerprints to the packaging, although as soon as that thought is born, I dismiss it. If Elaine wants to play this game, I’ll play. But there will only be one winner, and I won’t go quietly into the dark.

The sight of a man coming out of Rhea's room isn't shocking. I've had plenty of time to get used to that, having such a sexually liberated best friend. Honestly, the more time I spend with her brother, the more I understand. When done right, sex is phenomenal. All the years of men sneaking out of first our dorm and then our apartment didn't prepare me to understand the euphoria, but I get it now. But the man leaving Rhea's room catches my eye, and unlike any other man I've ever seen leaving her room, he looks guilty.

Panic flares for one quick moment inside of me, and I take a few steps toward her door, prepared to throw it open and check on her. But Dimitri winces, holding up a hand. "She's finally asleep."

Finally asleep?

I blink, remembering Remy's direction for him to take her upstairs last night and be sure that no one got near her. Did Dimitri stay with her all night? Did he sit by her bed and watch her all night?

I know the answer from the guilty look on his face alone. He looks like a cat sitting next to a suddenly empty fish tank, hanging his head as if he thinks I'm about to scold him. But I'm not Rhea's keeper, as much as I often convince myself I am. She's a grown adult, who can do whatever with whomever she pleases, as she established last week with the woman she brought home from the club.

Dimitri and I haven't had much interaction. He's got no reason to trust me, and I've got no reason to trust him, especially given that his predecessor had dumped me into the lap of rapists and murderers. And yet, I decide to give him the benefit of the doubt, because clearly Rhea trusts him.

She trusted Jovich, too.

And Elaine.

I shake my head, clearing it of those thoughts. The truth is, I have nowhere to go. Even if I did get a hold of the doctor, I doubt she'd come running all the way out here just to check on my wild theory. Dimitri has leeway to come and go, and he takes care of problems. I bet he is good at getting answers, too. "Is she okay?" I ask, letting him know by my tone that I'm not about to berate him for falling into Rhea's web.

"Yeah. There was a lot on her mind. I let her talk most of the night."

I almost ask about the rest of the night, but I press my lips together instead. Dimitri takes it as a sign of disapproval and turns to go, so I blurt

his name out quickly before he can get near the steps at the center of the corridor.

When Dimitri turns back to look at me, it's with a guarded expression I can't name. But he doesn't run or turn away as I close the distance between us, drawing close enough that I can whisper without my voice carrying. "When I went to the hospital the other day, I found out I'm being poisoned."

His face turns rapidly to disbelief, his lips parting to object, but I don't let him say anything as I slip the birth control from my back pocket and push the package into his hand. "I think this is how I've been getting sick. Can you have it tested for me?"

For a moment, he only stares as a myriad of emotions play on his handsome face—doubt, confusion, reluctance, but also concern. He doesn't believe that anybody in this household is capable of trying to kill me, which means he's either a good liar or truly a good person. I get my answer when he stuffs the package in his pocket and graces me with a curt nod. "Of course."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I wake up with the scent of her in my throat, and yet I wake up alone in complete darkness. I don’t remember pulling the curtains, but they do a good job of eclipsing the light they promised to keep out, and Claire did a good job sneaking out of my bed. It puts a strange hollowness in my stomach that I don’t care to contemplate, seeing the bed empty where she was when I turned off the light. I suppose it’s only fair, considering I did the same to her yesterday.

I’d hoped Davos was bold enough to do something stupid like walk into my house with his arms out so that I could flip the script on him. A man like Davos is so well insulated that the only mistakes he makes are because of his ego, but apparently even *he* isn’t arrogant enough to come to me when I’ve promised him an agonizing death.

The wake was performative, more of a formality that needed crossed off a list than a step toward closure for Rhea or me. I knew long ago there was no redemption for the Boudreaux’s, and now I know there is no closure for us either. If there was, it surely would have come when my father took his last breath. And yet here I am, no closer to walking away from any of this than the day I was dragged into it. My father’s death should have been the end of it, but I know too much for them to watch me walk into the sunset. Even if I could, I don’t think I have the capacity to leave.

It's fucked and it’s complicated. It’s dark and it’s depressing sometimes, but this is my life. If I turn my back on the world my father helped create, I’m turning my back on every future victim, every single person who could

potentially be saved from their fates. Falling asleep next to a woman lulled me into complacency, but I didn't tell her specifically that last night was a one-night-only thing because I worried about her not being able to walk away. I needed to say it out loud so that I could convince myself that the pain of losing whatever we created would be worth the pleasure of having her temporarily.

Waking up to an empty bed makes me unsure of that anymore. I don't regret anything we did, but I was dumb enough to think I could fuck someone like Claire Monroe out of my system. Instead, she settled under my skin.

I reach for my phone, hoping to find something to take my thoughts off of the woman who's taken possession of my mind.

My mood only sours when I see the text from Dimitri.

BIG PROBLEM. GUEST HOUSE. COME ASAP.

I'm not in the mood to deal with anything today, let alone Wes and his stupid fucking problems. I need to go to the bar and get a drink and let the music drown out the rest of my thoughts, not go play warden with the guy I probably should have just killed. It's clear that he doesn't mean anything to his father. And why would he? My father wouldn't have ever risked himself to come to my rescue, his pride be damned. He and Davos were two peas in a pod, sharing the same bad attitude, the same bad habits, and the same taste in women—or, I suppose, even sharing the same woman.

I don't bother sending a text back to Dimitri, tugging a black shirt over my head and slipping into a pair of board shorts. Once I've got everything squared away at the guest house, I think I'll take the boat out for a bit and let the open sea soothe my frustrations. That sounds far better than going to the bar and having to deal with people.

I'm not even all the way across the lawn before I see that Dimitri really undersold himself.

'A big problem' may just be the understatement of the fucking century, judging by all the blood splashed across my guest house door.

Doubling my pace, I sprint the rest of the way and throw the door open. "Where is he?" I demand, before I even see Dimitri standing with his arms crossed in the corner.

"I guess Wes got the jump on him." Dimitri says, nodding toward the kitchen, where the trail of blood ends abruptly beneath a body.

The man we hired to run point on our extra security for last night's event is dead as a doornail, his neck slashed from side to side. Wes literally went for the jugular, ending this man in a matter of moments.

But how did he get ahold of a weapon?

I'm opening my mouth to ask when this happened, but I can tell it's been a while. I've seen plenty of fresh corpses, and this isn't one of them. I am prepared to curse the dead man on my floor, but I snap my mouth shut instead, grinding my jaw shut and biting back the tension in me.

Words don't serve the moment, and they won't help right now, so I spin fast as a flash and bury my fist in the wall behind me. The drywall cracks around my fist, dust floating out from around the hole I just put in it. There's no satisfaction to be found here; It's like putting my fist through paper which gives easily under my wrath.

Wes is gone. And the truth is, someone had to have helped him escape. I simply can't see Wes managing to sneak a blade out of my home full of people without anyone noticing. He also clearly attacked when the security guard had his back to him, unlocking the guest house door. Why would he have turned his back on Wes knowing what I told them about him?

The tension pulls on every vein, every string of muscle in my body, until I feel wound so tight, I may snap. I almost do, as realization slams into me, panic riding the wave right along with it. "Claire!"

I'm not typically a heavy sleeper, but I slept through her leaving my room. Did she do so of her own volition or was she pulled out? Lured out? And Rhea. I told Dimitri to protect her last night, but when did he leave her? Is he certain that Wes left without trying to make a move against one of the girls?

"Claire's fine." Dimitri says quickly. "I saw her this morning."

"When?" I demand, turning to take him in. I've trusted Dimitri because I forged him, but the truth of it is, someone helped my stupid half-brother gain his freedom. I'd have said Dimitri wasn't capable of betrayal—he's proven himself a hundred times over—but I never would have suspected Jovich of doing what he did.

"Twenty minutes ago?" He guesses, eyes running over me like he's sensing my suspicion. "She was on her way out of her room alone, and she was perfectly fine."

"And Rhea?"

“Same. She was still sleeping when I left her room twenty minutes ago, which is when I saw Claire.” His jaw ticks, and I watch his throat bob as he swallows, nervous.

I pause a minute as his words sink in. “You spent the *entire night* in my sister’s room?”

“You told me not to leave her alone.” Dimitri defends himself.

“So why did you?” I narrow my eyes on him, letting him feel the weight of my suspicion for a minute.

“I… I didn’t want her to be embarrassed when she woke up, so I left this morning and locked the door. I came straight here to check on everything and that’s when I found this…”

It won’t be hard to corroborate his story once I check in with Claire. I’ll casually ask her if she saw Dimitri this morning and go from there. It won’t answer whether or not he truly spent the whole night in my sister’s room, but if Claire backs him up on this, at least it will help alleviate some of the distrust I feel right now.

I don’t want Dimitri to have betrayed me, but I trusted him to hire this man, and now he’s dead. “Who is he?” I ask, running a hand through my hair. Most of the time, these contractors are men of various backgrounds, looking to make some quick cash. I’m hoping he doesn’t have a family that I’ll have to find a way to offer some sort of explanation to.

Dimitri matches my stress, rubbing the space between his eyebrows. “Brandon Kane. He’s one of Jackson’s.”

That name gives me pause, so I flit my eyes away from the man on the ground, blood soaking through his previously white shirt, and give Dimitri my undivided attention. “Jackson Holland’s?”

“Yes.” He nods.

As if things weren’t fucked already, now this? “When you say he was one of Jackson’s…?”

I don’t have to finish the question. Dimitri knows the direction of my thoughts, and he follows them flawlessly, offering me the answer to the question I never asked. “His son-in-law.” Dimitri confirms gravely.

“Damn it!” I hiss, curling my fist again. I need a target more satisfying than my drywall, but Wes is gone and he’s the one I really want to take this frustration out on.

Jackson Holland runs the most expansive private security firm on any continent. His loyalty is never given but rented hourly. Whether he hates

you or loves you, he ensures that the jobs he takes are authentic experiences for his customers. For the right price, he'd be the devil's own bodyguard.

The men Holland employs aren't drifters, contractors, or loners. They're men who have been trained extensively, who live to serve his company, who he trusts like family not to betray him. And apparently the one dead on my floor is *literal* family.

This is bad.

No, calling it bad is like calling the gash in his neck a superficial cut, when I'm pretty sure if I move the body, his head will barely hang on.

If—no, *when*—Jackson Holland finds out about this, I'm fucked.

I know that he sent more than one of his men here last night, so where are the rest of them? Why would they have ever let Brandon and Wes go off alone unless they were either so confident that Brandon could handle him alone or they wanted to sacrifice his safety?

"Where's Michael?"

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

The breeze today is gentle but persistent. It takes some of the heat out of the air despite the sun beaming down relentlessly, turning the ocean on the horizon into a glittering expanse. I stretch my toes, reveling in the feeling of peace rippling through me as I watch the water.

When I came downstairs this morning, the house was spotless, with all remnants of the night before gone as if it never happened. Elaine was nowhere to be seen, probably tired from single-handedly cleaning up the mess that got left behind after the last guests headed out. Feeling emboldened by figuring out her scheme, I got myself a glass of water and a bagel, no longer too afraid to eat, and headed to the patio to enjoy it in peace as the sun continued to rise.

I'm not sure how long I've been out here, but it's been the most relaxing chunk of my vacation thus far. I'm not sure whether I should be salty about that, but I'm not. It just feels good to soak in the sun… so much so that I'm practically asleep by the time the patio door opening steals my peace.

I turn to find Rhea squinting into the daylight as if she's personally offended by it. If I thought my hair looked wild this morning, hers puts mine to shame as she pushes it out of her face and ambles over to me with her eyes practically closed. She doesn't acknowledge me when she collapses onto the chair beside mine, throwing her hands over her face and groaning.

"Morning sunshine," I laugh, unable to help myself. I've seen her hungover more than I've ever been hungover myself. But something about

this time is different… perhaps because it follows the wake of her father and she's still trying to contend with what a piece of shit he was.

"No sunshine here." She mumbles. The words are obscured by her hands, but I piece them together just in time to laugh again at her. "I'm a storm cloud today, Claire. Dark and heavy."

Well, that peace was nice while it lasted.

I sigh, preparing myself to hear her lament her father's evil deeds or something, but instead, she pulls her hands from her face and snaps her head toward me. "I slept with Dimitri."

There's something in her tone of voice that tells me it's a confession of sin rather than a casual admittance to her best friend. Of course, she doesn't know that I ran into Dimitri this morning . "I kind of gathered as much when I saw him creeping out of your room at six a.m."

Rhea's mouth falls open in shock as she stares at me. "Six a.m.?"

I nod.

"You mean he stayed… all night?" Rhea can't deny the curve of her lips as she tries not to smile. It's the first hint of cheerfulness I've seen from her this morning.

"Why is this a big deal? You sleep with lots of people."

The cheerfulness from the second before disappears promptly. "Are you calling me a whore?" She snaps. It's a little more frosty than usual, lacking in the teasing edge I think she was going for. I chuckle anyway.

"Of course not. But a week ago it was a woman sneaking out of your room to steal your brother's coffee, and now it's Dimitri trying not to get seen by your brother, probably. Before we came here, you were talking about sleeping with Tristan Ryan. Why does this one matter?"

I've known Rhea long enough to know that despite her status in life, she doesn't discern against what she wants. If she's drawn to someone, she'll go after them regardless of if it's the bus boy at a restaurant or the DJ at a club. I assume her shame has more to do with the fact that he's employed by Remy rather than his job doing whatever he does for him.

"He works for my brother." She groans, confirming my suspicion. "I bet Remy will give him the axe when he finds out."

"Why would he do that?" I prod, offering her my glass of water. Rhea glares at it for a moment and then sits up to take it, drinking it down in a few big gulps. I'm her best friend and I'm sleeping with her brother. Surely

if Rhea can be okay with that, Remy can tolerate Dimitri and Rhea sleeping together one time… assuming it *was* one time.

"I realize you're new here, Claire," she says sympathetically, "but sleeping with the person you're supposed to protect is like, the one thing you *shouldn't* do… not that I need Dimitri's protection."

"Of course," I patronize her with a smile. Truthfully, the world outside of Remy's home is probably rife with danger, but I trust that we're safe here. Someone somewhere out there has paid a hefty price for my life—I expect they're not just going to give up on trying to collect. It's a weird thought to try and reconcile.

I think of the Senator with his eyes all over me last night, like he couldn't believe what he was seeing, and feel unease settle in my stomach. I don't want to let go of what little remains of my bliss out here, though, so I put him out of my mind and turn my head so that it's level with Rhea's.

I know Remy's got cameras all over his house—there's one just behind us that I spotted on the first day we were here. I just hope he isn't watching right now so he doesn't hear me ask his sister, "Well? Was it good?"

Rhea laughs and looks for a second like she's going to throw the empty water cup at me. "*Was it good*?" She mimics. "No, Claire. It wasn't *good*. It was… amazing."

That's a ringing endorsement from her, and I can't help wondering if her intoxicated state may have contributed to her thinking the experience was amazing. Dimitri is objectively good looking, but with all of Rhea's experience, I find it hard to believe that he is capable of satisfying her sexual appetite so completely that she'd consider it *amazing*.

"You're lying." I say, searching her eyes for any hint that she is messing with me.

"Are you seriously telling me you *didn't* hear me screaming last night? Because I know I wasn't quiet."

Not wanting to tell her I was too busy getting pleasure of my own, I just shake my head, to which she sighs at me like I simply don't understand. "On my shitty fatther's grave, Claire, it was the best sex of my fucking life. Which is why this is a problem."

And just like that, I get it.

The problem isn't that she's embarrassed to say she slept with her brother's employee. The problem isn't that she spent the night with a man who was supposed to just keep her safe for the night.

The problem is that, whether they were sparked by last night or just cemented by whatever transpired between them, she's got some kind of feelings for Dimitri. Dimitri, who lives in Costa Rica. Dimitri, who works for her brother. Dimitri, who would never let her get attached to him because his lifestyle is so incompatible with hers.

Suddenly, Rhea's predicament hits me like a wrecking ball.

Her predicament is the same as my own.

We're both fucked.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

“I want eyes on every door and window in this house.” I snap, my anger sawing at my own nerves. “No one comes in or out. No one. Do you understand?”

Dimitri nods curtly as he pulls up the security feed without looking away from the screen. I’m glad he’s taking my direction literally.

We’re friends as much as we are employer and employee, but any of the ease that’s grown between us has disappeared in this moment. Dimitri recognizes the severity of the situation. Jackson Holland will come after everyone and everything in my life if he thinks I had anything to do with the murder of one of his people. Add to that the fact that the rest of his workers are missing, Jackson hasn’t answered any of the three calls I’ve made to him, and the fact that Wes could be anywhere right now, and Dimitri understands just how bad our situation is.

I know better than anyone that just because someone is tied to you by the bond of blood or marriage, it doesn’t make them family. There’s a chance, however small, that Brandon Kane was a thorn in Jackson’s side whose death won’t provoke the wrath of his father-in-law. Not only do I want to know if Jackson is going to send his army after me, but I also need to know how he wants me to handle the body left in my guesthouse. Whether I have Dimitri get rid of him in the usual way or not makes all the difference in whether he can explain this to his daughter as a casualty of their line of work or writing him off as a coward who cut and ran. If he’d just answer

the phone, I wouldn't have to leave the girls in the care of Dimitri, who's on my shit list.

But I have an ace up my sleeve. I just have to get out to play it.

"Call me if anything happens." I tell him, not bothering to say the words that don't need spoken.

Don't let anything happen.

Leaving Dimitri in charge of the welfare of the only people I care about is a calculated move. If he's still loyal to me, now is his chance to prove it. I know he would never hurt an innocent woman—he's only involved in all of this because he despises people who *do* hurt innocents—women especially. Money talks—and sometimes screams—but that is one part of him that I think Dimitri would never compromise, not for his life or all the money in the world.

Michael, on the other hand? He would sell his soul for pennies if the devil simply told him it was worth nothing more. It's not that he's stupid, it's just that he wants to be wanted. He came into my employment two years ago—the last time I hired Holland Protective Solutions.

Michael startles when I walk into his room, sitting up so quickly that he winces. He opens his mouth to speak but lets it close when I hold up a hand. "Give me your phone." I tell him, holding my palm out expectantly.

Confusion crosses his face, which is unshaven, but he doesn't hesitate, reaching to the stand on the other side of him and retrieving his phone for me. When he presses it into my outstretched hand, I can tell that he's got a million questions he wants to ask me, but he can't get a single one of them out. I wouldn't listen even if he was capable.

When Jackson's voice sounds around the small hospital room, Michael knows he's dead in the water. I see the recognition in his eyes just before it turns to desperation. He reaches desperately for the pad of paper next to his bed, but I stop him with a shake of my head.

"Didn't expect to hear from you so soon, Mikey boy." Jackson's tone is light and breezy with his own amusement. It fades quickly when I speak.

"It's been a while, Jackson."

There's a silence on the other end of the line as Jackson searches his memory for the voice, trying to piece together where he recognizes it from. "Boudreaux?"

"The one and only." I bite out, eyes flashing to Michael, who looks like a scolded child right now, his mouth opening and closing wordlessly.

“Good to hear from you, Remy!” Jackson says, recovering quickly. “How was your party?”

Jackson knows his men were hired for security at the wake; he’s aiming to piss me off by referring to it as a party, but he’s overestimating my affection for my father. He’s actually not too far off base. “Why don’t you ask your men how they liked it?” I suggest, “I think most of them will tell you it was a good night. Well, all except one.”

“Ah,” Jackson makes a noise of agreement. “There were casualties then?”

“Just the one.” I say calmly. “Where should I have his body sent?”

“How kind of you to ask.” Jackson quips, sounding bored. “Do whatever you do with them.”

“You’ll handle the fall-out then?”

Jackson doesn’t hesitate. “Of course! I have measures in place for this sort of thing, you know? It’s a dangerous job, shit happens.”

“Mm.” I agree. “So, Jenny won’t ask any questions about what happened to her husband’s body?”

This time, he does hesitate. There’s a long pause on the other end of the line as he grapples with the knowledge that I know. “Jenny will be glad to know he won’t be coming home. She won’t have to explain the bloodstains on the mattress where he fucked his mistress.”

Killed for cheating on the daughter of a man with more money than sense? It’s a touch on the nose, but Jackson hasn’t exactly made a name for himself by being discreet. “Very well. And when will my property be returned to me?”

“Your property?” Jackson laughs. “My men wouldn’t have taken any of your possessions.”

“And yet, something is missing.” I bite back, waiting for him to fill in the blanks. I have to be vague on the phone—God only knows who could be listening. Jackson Holland has had the feds breathing down his back more than a time or two, but like a cat with nine lives, he’s remained unscathed up to this point.

“Ah,” I imagine him nodding at his big glass desk in his big glass office like a caricature of an important man. “Yes, I did hear that someone slipped away when my men got the jump on them.”

“Your men got the jump on them?” I mimic, glancing at Michael for confirmation. He nods in earnest, eyes wide.

“Look, I’m sorry that things went down the way they did.” Jackson sighs. “It was nothing personal. Costa Rica is a large country; laws are different there. People go missing all the time. It was the perfect opportunity.”

“So, you let me pay for your services to perform a hit on one of your own men and… what? I was just a casualty of your own affairs?”

“Now, Remy,” Jackson tsks. “You got caught in the crossfire, kid. It was an unfortunate side effect that one of your captives got away, but you can always replace them. I’ll front you the cost of a new one.”

I nearly laugh at the blasé tone of voice as he suggests that people are expendable. He thinks Wes was one of my possessions—I fed into that theory by claiming Wes as ‘my property’. Jackson assumes I am like the rest, that I collect people to suit my needs and then dispose of them when they no longer serve me. He thinks I’m like him, and as much as I want to set him straight, it’s better that he thinks I’m just another one of them—dead inside, so entrenched in this world that they’ve sacrificed their humanity to long ago.

“Some people can’t be replaced,” I snap, pinching the bridge of my nose where a headache is starting between my eyes.

It was bad enough thinking that Michael had sold his loyalty to someone else, but it’s worse knowing that Wes’ escape was just a casualty of Jackson’s plot to punish his son-in-law’s infidelity, as if he’s an authority on healthy marriages. My mood darkening, I nearly throw the phone when he laughs. “Of course they can. I’ll even send you my secretary to prove it.”

“Your secretary?” I sneer, unable to keep myself from sounding incredulous.

“She’s great at everything she does, and she does *everything*.” He chuckles to himself.

It takes a moment to even collect my thoughts, so by the time I open my mouth, Jackson is rushing me off the phone. “I’ve got your address, so I’ll have her sent tonight. I’ve got a meeting right now, but this was great, Boudreaux. Let’s talk again soon.”

The line goes dead before I can protest, casting Michael and I in silence.

He takes the phone when I offer it to him and immediately sets to typing, his fingers moving quickly over the screen and then passes it quickly back.

Wes is gone?

I’m clenching my jaw so tight it’s a wonder that my teeth don’t shatter. I nod curtly, so Michael types out another message.

I suggested Holland. Didn't know he was going to pull this.

"Wes slit your throat." I remind him, just in case he's forgotten. "He put you here."

Michael glances around the room, almost like he's looking for Wes himself, and then types again.

I would never betray you unless it was to kill him myself.

"Time will tell." I shrug, stepping back as the door opens and a chipper nurse walks through, smiling brightly.

"Oh. You've got a visitor, today!" She says pleasantly.

This is the same hospital Claire was brought to when we were at the funeral. Dimitri brought Michael here. Did they come up with this plan together? Did they know that Holland was going to take advantage of my desperation?

"I was just leaving." I tell her. "But you may need to give him an enema."

The nurse frowns, glancing at Michael, who shakes his head adamantly. "Why?"

"Because," I tell her, "I'm pretty sure he's full of shit."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Rhea's itinerary for our trip kind of went to hell in a handbasket after her pseudo-uncle kidnapped me and then everything spiraled out of control. We haven't had much time to spend together, honestly, with everything else that we've had to contend with, so when she comes up with a plan for the day, I agree without knowing what it is I'm consenting to. Usually that would be a somewhat dangerous game, but I'm so desperate to get a sense of normalcy in my life that I don't even care what she has planned.

Her hand is on the doorknob and the keys to one of the cars are in her hand when Dimitri comes from nowhere, spinning her around so fast her hair nearly whips me in the face. "No." Dimitri says. Just one word, and I feel scolded… and annoyed.

Rhea is a touch more than that. Her eyes narrow on him even as fire flashes there. "*No*?"

"No one leaves the house today." He says, taking advantage of her distractedness to slide himself between us and the front door.

"What?" I ask, at the same time Rhea asks, "why?"

"Remy's instruction." Dimitri folds his arms over his broad chest, like that's supposed to tell us he's serious or something.

Rhea studies him openly, scrutinizing every inch of his face and then her gaze turns languid as it trails further down his body. I notice the slight reddening of her cheeks—it's hard to see with her golden complexion, but it's there.

Rhea Boudreaux is *blushing* over a man.

She really does have a problem.

“I don’t care what Remy wants.” I say, hoping Dimitri will relay that to his employer exactly. My headstrong best friend is apparently a wilting flower in the presence of this man. Even though I don’t want to think about it, I can’t help but wonder what the hell happened between them that turned her into someone who takes *no* for an answer.

“He’s not the boss of us.” Rhea chimes in, though her voice lacks the usual amount of sass.

“No.” Dimitri agrees. “But he’s my boss and he told me no one gets in or out today. So, I will stop you, no matter what it takes.”

In my peripheral vision I see Rhea bite her lip, looking very much like she wants to tempt him just to see how far he’ll go to stop her. “Where is he?” I demand, ready to take the matter up with him myself. As grateful as I am for the protection he’s offered me, I never signed up to be his prisoner. Hell, I’m not even his possession. We’ve been fucking around, sure. A= k nd he’s made me feel more pleasure in the last week than I’ve felt in my twenty years before, but we explicitly agreed upon terms that left no room for confusion. So, what makes him think he can control when or where I go?

“Come on,” Rhea says, nodding her head toward the patio. I’m not sure if she’s backing down or if she plans to sneak out the back door, but I follow her without argument.

When we step outside, I turn to her expectantly to see the glimmer of excitement in her eye. “Remington doesn’t tell us what to do.” She says, reiterating her earlier sentiment. “And neither do his lackeys.”

I almost laugh at the way she doesn’t sound entirely convinced on the last part. She turns to get a glance at Dimitri, who’s still watching us with his arms crossed from the other side of the glass door, scowling. He’s pretty good-looking, but all that scowling is going to put wrinkles in his face long before they’re meant to be there. “So, what are we doing?” I don’t necessarily mind the idea of a pool day with her, but it pales in comparison to the idea of adventure she instilled in me earlier.

“Laugh.” She commands in a hushed tone. When my confusion is obvious, she only repeats herself. “*Laugh*.”

I’m no actress, but I throw my head back and laugh like she just told me something really funny. “Good.” Rhea nods her approval. “We don’t want him to think we’re plotting.”

“*Are* we plotting?”

“I’m always plotting.” Rhea shrugs. “Here, take the keys.”

I don’t even have a chance to contemplate that before she steps closer to me, just enough to obscure Dimitri’s view, and presses the keychain into my hand. I flatten it against my palm the best I can—why are there so many keys on this damn thing? It must weigh a full pound, and if they have any concerns about us going out on our own, they needn’t stress over them because the keys could surely be used as a weapon—whether I chuck them at someone’s head or use the jagged one to gouge someone’s eye out.

“Now what?” I ask, though I’m pretty sure I know what she’s going to say.

“Now we split up,” she laughs. “You go to the boat; I’ll go for the car. Dimitri will follow me, which will give you a chance to get away.”

“And then what?” I’m not going anywhere alone, let alone to go hang out on Remy’s boat, waiting for… I don’t even know.

“Then you hide the keys.” Her eyes are excited as my brain pieces everything together.

“You want to lock Dimitri out?”

“Just a little while. Long enough to show him who’s in charge.”

It’s such a simple prank it feels almost foolish. And yet, it’s also lighthearted fun, which we’ve been in serious need of around here. “What if Elaine lets him in?”

“I’ll tell her to let him sweat it out a bit.” Rhea shrugs. “Honestly, who cares? It’s just a prank.”

A harmless prank.

Honestly, if we can’t get out of the house to do something, we may as well have a little fun here. “Okay.” I say, looping a finger through the keyring to secure my grip on them. “When?”

Rhea glances toward the house from the corner of her eye, where Dimitri has eased back, looking at something on his phone. “Now.”

The command takes me by surprise, and I’m opening my mouth to ask her if she means now we start counting to three or now we go, but she’s already rushing across the patio to where it drops off on the side of the house. I don’t dare look back to see if Dimitri saw us make our break for it—I sprint in the opposite direction, a thrill rushing through my veins at the simplicity of what we’re doing. Rhea’s always liked to pull pranks on people—we once rearranged our roommate’s entire room when she spent

the night at her boyfriend's. I'm not sure where her penchant for shenanigans came from since she most certainly didn't pull these little stunts with her stuffy parents.

I hear the door open behind me, hear Dimitri yell after us, but I don't slow down or turn to see if he followed me or Rhea. It's a no-brainer that he'd follow her—she had the car keys last he saw. She's also the ringleader between the two of us, and she's the one who he's keen on. Nevertheless, I sprint the entire way down the dock, through the quiet canopy of trees. I'm the only thing making any noise as I tear down the path and launch myself over the side of the boat.

It feels like half a lifetime ago when Remy helped me over the side of it and took me out onto the water. It feels like ages since he pulled that gun on me because he couldn't trust anyone in his life other than his sister. I know now how true that really is.

I land on my feet on the bottom of the boat and rush to the cabin to find a spot to hide the keys. When we were here the other night, I realized just how big the interior is. Lots of places to hide stuff. And yet, as paranoid as Remy is, his boat is the one thing he doesn't keep under lock and key.

My hand is slippery on the doorknob as I twist it open, my palms sweaty with the exhilaration of running so far and fast. I shut the door quickly but quietly behind me just in case Dimitri trailed me, and then take a second to catch my breath on the other side, letting my eyes close as I draw in a deep breath… which turns to a scream a moment later.

"You just can't stay away."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

“Wes!” I gasp. The shock of seeing him here combined with the shock of not being alone out here and the air I deprived my lungs of during my run makes my chest seize as my heart hammers against my ribcage. All of the bravado I felt yesterday when I faced him is gone as I look at him now, one palm planted on the counter with a shaky arm supporting him.

He manages a wicked grin, but it flashes to a grimace of pain before he snags a whiskey bottle off the counter and stumbles toward me. Except, he doesn’t come for me—he moves past me to the bench and collapses into it, gritting his teeth against the impact as he leans back.

That’s when I see the blood all down the front of his white shirt, soaking through to the skin beneath. He’s shed the suit jacket, and his face is covered in a sheen of sweat, dirt streaking one side and his hair disheveled, but I can tell he’s still wearing last night’s clothes.

“What are you doing here?” I demand, my stomach twisting as my baser instincts tell me to run far away and not look back or think about this monster. “Where’s Remy?”

Panic laces my veins as I consider what may have happened to allow Wes to make his escape, to cause him to be so obviously hurt in a scuffle.

Wes laughs. “I’m not his keeper, Claire. I thought you were.”

I don’t take the bait on that, sliding my hand against the door slowly until I feel the cold metal knob hit the base of my hand. I just have to wait for the right moment to get a good grip on it, and then I can move out of the way to

throw it open. Wes' eyes are too focused on me right now to make a move like that, though I have my doubts about how well he'd be able to chase me.

He looks *rough*.

"It's my day off," I tell him, matching his sarcasm with my own. "Is it your day off from being his prisoner?"

Wes laughs, but his grin turns to a grimace when a wave of pain hits him, making him clutch his side. "I escaped last night." He says. "While Boudreaux was upstairs pouting over how you wanted to fuck me, the absolute morons he hired to secure his party staged a coup."

"A coup?" I feel the doorknob under my palm as I grab for more of it, letting my fingers close around it. I hadn't even considered until now that he may not be alone here.

I let my eyes trail around the space, looking for anything that may indicate there's someone else with us.

That's when I notice all the blood.

There's practically a river of it just on the other side of the island, and a trail going from there to the spot where I'd first found him leaning on the counter. If all that blood is his, there's no chance of Wes getting up and chasing after me. And yet, I don't run. My feet don't get the message that my brain is screaming. "Your men?"

"No," he laughs and winces again. "No, my dear old dad didn't send help for me. This was just a wrong place, wrong time situation. I got away, but that bastard stabbed me in the fray." He uncaps the whiskey and stares at it a moment before lifting it to his lips and taking a sip straight from the bottle. It's just a small one, but it's enough to make him pull back, sputtering and coughing and wincing some more. "I knew I wouldn't get far on foot, so I hid. But I wasn't counting on how much blood I lost."

"You're a surgeon." I say, as if he doesn't know that. "Shouldn't you know how to survive a stab wound?"

Wes stares at me deadpan. The green of his eyes is eerily beautiful, almost neon, but there's no life in them. No fire, no teasing, no care. He must be in agony, his brain shutting down his necrotic personality to protect him from the edge of insanity. "If I could get to a fucking needle, sure. Not out here in the middle of nowhere."

"So, you're dying." I surmise, choosing not to mince words.

"Bingo." He musters a lift of his lips, something I imagine is supposed to be a smirk. "It's your lucky day, Monroe."

“My *lucky day*?”

“I saw that look in your eyes yesterday. You want me dead; you just didn’t want to be the one who did it. Scared I’ll haunt you when I go?”

“Wrong.” I don’t want to kill him because I’m not entirely sure how I feel about the first murder I committed, though I’m not going to tell him that. And now that he mentioned it, the thought of Wes haunting me from beyond the grave is horrific—not because I’d live in fear, but because he’s the most insufferable person I’ve ever met and if death can’t even get him out of my life, it means there’s no hope for me. “I don’t want you dead, Wes. I want you suffering… the way you made me suffer. I want you to scream for help that never comes. I want you to rot from the inside out until this version of you on the outside matches your black and dying heart. And I want you to live knowing that you didn’t’ fucking break me.”

“Big words for a woman who stabbed an immobilized man through the hand last night.” He lifts his hand a little, showing the bandage that Dimitri had wrapped around it, covered in the blood of his other wounds. “If it’s any consolation, getting stabbed by you was a lot sexier than taking it from a man my size.”

I almost laugh at that. It’s absurd, but I can’t help it. Something about the sincerity with which he said it strikes me as hysterical, and while I do a good job at reigning it in, I crack a small smile.

I’m not sure what sort of extradition laws exist between the U.S. and Costa Rica, and I don’t know if I could ever pursue any sort of legal justice against Wes without implicating Remy and making a mess of everything. But I do know that I want the chance to see him behind bars, locked in a cage, treated like the animal he is.

My hand closes on the doorknob and I throw it open, just the way I planned, slamming it shut behind me. I don’t go for the dock, though.

I don’t know what comes after this life. Heaven, maybe? Hell, probably. But I know that there can’t be anything that comes close to the amount of suffering this world and all of its monsters are capable of inflicting.

I can’t let him die.

I run to the wheel and dangle the keys in front of me, looking for one that looks like it belongs to a boat—not that I have any concept of what that would look like.

I don’t hear Wes open the door until he’s behind me, a hand pressed firmly against the slash in his shirt. “You know how to drive this thing?”

I glance up at him. In the mid-afternoon sun, he looks even more pale than I thought he was. Even if I can figure out which key goes in the ignition and get it close enough to the city to get him to a hospital, it may all be for nothing. I can't tell how much time he has left. "No."

Only three keys on this ring have the old-fashioned rubber grip I associate with car keys, so I pick one and try to jam it into the ignition. It scrapes against the metal, too large and blunt. The next one seems like it may fit, but only the tip of it slides in before it doesn't budge any further. Wes shakes his head and holds his hand out expectantly.

It's stupid to give him the keys, I guess. But it's equally as stupid to try and save him instead of letting nature take its course here. "You'll flood the engine messing around like this." He mutters as I pass them over.

"Like you care." I snap, watching him thumb through the keys. He settles on one and holds it up to the light to get a better look at it before sinking it into the ignition and turning it. The boat barely makes a noise as it purrs to life.

"I can't drive like this." Wes grunts, gesturing to the side of his stomach. Now that he's close, I can see that he did at least do a little work on the wound—he's got a washcloth pressed against his skin and wrapped it with some sort of tape. I guess it makes sense that Remy would have a basic first-aid kit on board.

"Okay," I nod.

How hard can it be to drive a boat? It's not like there are a million other boats to worry about in the ocean, unlike driving in the car.

I see his knuckles go white as he grabs ahold of the captain's chair and fights to keep himself upright. "Go sit down." I snap at him. He won't be any help to me in this state, and I don't need him hovering.

"I can guide you away from the dock."

"I don't need you to guide me. I need you to go the fuck away before I change my mind about trying to help you."

Wes' lips twitch a little, but the smile doesn't make it to his face. He turns to hobble away as I take in the gauges and controls on the dash and try to convince myself I'm totally right about this being something I can do.

"Monroe," Wes calls, just as my fingers close around the wheel.

"What?" I growl, my irritation unmatched as I spin around to see what the hell his problem is.

But it's not just his problem. It's my problem, too.

Remy's running down the dock, his black shirt clinging to him like a second skin as he closes the distance between us. He doesn't slow down as he rushes at me, though I see the confusion in his eyes when he sees me standing at the wheel. And then understanding seems to grip him, and I see the anger flash across his face.

"Go!" Wes yells, gripping the edge of the boat.

I throw it in reverse, expecting it to peel away from the dock quickly.

It doesn't.

The motor may as well belong to a kids' RC car, considering how slow it moves. I know it's capable of more, given that Remy was able to barrel us through a storm and outrun the onslaught in it.

"Claire!" Wes yells, and I shift the gear to see if that will help. But it's too late. Remy gets a hand on the side of the boat and launches himself onto the deck before the engine picks up. Wes braces himself for impact, but Remy doesn't even go for him. He stalks directly toward me, grabs the back of my neck to spin me around, and presses me against the dash. Knobs and levers poke at my back as he grinds me against it with one hand and grabs ahold of the wheel with the other.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" He roars, louder than necessary since the engine cuts out in the middle.

"He's dying." I say, pointing at Wes. "I'm not just going to let him bleed to death, Remy."

"I don't give a fuck about him!" He snaps without taking his eyes off of me.

That blazing inferno of copper and sage in his eyes tells me all I need to know. He's not just mad—he's furious. "Well, I do!"

I'm not sure why I say it—it's not entirely true. The extent of it is pretty much just that I don't want him to die, but that's not a good enough reason to tell Remy I care about him. And if I thought Remy was furious before, I don't know what to call the state he slips into when he repeats the words back to me. "You *care* about him?" He laughs.

"I don't want him to bleed to death on your boat, Remy!" I try to reason, but it's useless. There's no backing my way out of this. He's eerily calm, the quirk of his lips more of a disbelieving smirk than a smile.

"Well, I'm glad to know how you truly feel, Claire." He drops his hand from me like I'm searing his fingertips. "Go."

"Go?"

“Go sit your ass down. You’re clearly not capable of driving this boat, and I don’t want to die today.”

I don’t even bother being offended since he’s right. I don’t know what I’m doing, and though I can tell he’s pissed about it, this is better than stealing the boat, crashing it, and then explaining what happened. Even if by some miracle I didn’t crash his boat, I’d still be responsible for explaining all the blood splashed around the deck like a damn murder scene.

The life is draining from Wes when I turn to look at him. His skin is ashy, his lips pale and pressed together tightly. I watch him stumble toward the bench seat, one hand out in an attempt to get some balance, the other clutched against his wound like that will keep his insides from falling out.

Remy’s angry stare tingles in the space between my shoulder blades as I cross to Wes with my arms folded. I don’t want to be near him, but I don’t want him to die more than I want to ignore his existence and betrayal. “So cold.” Wes pants when I lean against the bench without getting close to him. I can hear his ragged breaths, and while part of me feels vindicated at his obvious distress, another part of me feels like this is a very hollow victory.

“You’ll be fine,” I say tersely. “You’ll warm up soon.”

“No,” he grits his teeth as the boat rocks into a wave. I don’t know if there are speed limits on the open sea, but if there are, Remy’s probably exceeding it. That tells me he at least cares a little about what happens to Wes, whether it’s for altruistic reasons or otherwise. “You’re cold… frigid like your icy eyes.”

It takes a moment, but I realize he’s talking about my temperament. When I get it, I laugh. It’s absurd that he has the nerve to mock my handling of him, as if I don’t have the right to want to put as much distance as possible between us. After what he did, calling me frigid is like telling the rain it’s wet. “Forgive me for not falling over myself to appease my fucking kidnapper.”

That gets a laugh out of him, though it turns into more of a grunt of pain before the wind whips between us and carries it away. “You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“You think you deserve forgiveness?”

“You think I want it?” He counters.

He’s beautiful—he has been from the moment I first saw him. But beneath the gorgeous emerald eyes and those sharp cheekbones, he’s

rotting.

Like me.

“No.” I shake my head.

Wes and Remy and I are all fucked in our own rights, our humanity decaying. The truth is, we’re all the monster in someone else’s nightmares. I killed my monster, but it didn’t make me a hero. It made me into one of *them*. I’ve been baptized by the blood of my tormentor and practically burnt myself to ashes in the wake of my dance with the darkness. Deep down, part of me knows that trying to save him is a half-assed grab for redemption, as if there’s any hope for my soul. In reality, saving Wes could cause more harm to the rest of the world. A flash of an old fable crosses my mind—the woman who asked the snake why he bit her.

Because it’s my nature, the snake said.

It didn’t matter that the woman healed the snake, saved him from death. He still bit her at the first chance he got. Wes is a snake, but am I the woman who gets bitten and accepts her death?

“If you die, Wes,” I swallow, my throat thick, “You’ll never get a chance to prove you won’t bite me.”

His eyes flash a moment, like he wants to make a joke about biting me, but his lips just flick upward before the grin slips from his face. He’s fading.

I glance up just in time to see the strip of land in the distance growing as we approach. Remy comes in hot, probably faster than he should reasonably be going. By the time I look back at Wes, he’s slumped to the side, his head drooping on his shoulders. “We’re here, Wes.” I say, though I don’t know if that’s actually true. I see a few buildings, but not what I expect a hospital to look like.

I’m already draping his arm over my shoulder by the time Remy appears, glaring at me like I kicked his puppy. “What are you thinking, Claire? He’ll crush you, and then I’ll have two people to drag in for medical attention.”

Wes’ weight shifts toward me as I pull him up, proving Remy right again. Thankfully, he doesn’t drive that point home, choosing instead to loop Wes’ other arm around his neck. “I’ll support him. Just apply pressure to the wound.”

I don’t have anything to cover him with, and I don’t have time to strip off my tank top and use it as a bandage, so I just press my hand to the spot where Wes had kept his. It’s covered in a layer of blood-soaked gauze,

sticky as it dries and congeals on top of it. His blood isn't as hot as I expect it to be—fair, I guess, since he's a cold-blooded reptile.

Walking three-wide with me trying to stay attached to Wes enough to keep pressure on his stomach is awkward at best, but Remy supports him as he practically drags Wes over the side of the boat, and I scramble after them. My eyes search the cityscape, looking for our destination but still not seeing anything that looks like a hospital.

Remy leads us up the dock and then makes a sharp turn right while I nearly trip over my feet trying to stay on them. A figure rushes at us, waving their hands above their head as if trying to get us to notice them. When he gets close enough for me to see the balding man in the white coat, I narrow my eyes on Remy. "Garcia," Remy nods as the presumed doctor edges me out to take over the burden of dragging Wes the rest of the way to a white door painted to blend in with the rest of the building before us.

As soon as he opens the door, it's to a cacophony of sounds—barking, meowing, cawing.

The door swings shut loudly behind me as I follow them into the building, where my suspicions are confirmed as he leads us past a row of kennels. Doors line one side of the hall, and he throws one of them open to reveal a silver exam table that even I wouldn't fit on. That doesn't deter the doctor—or veterinarian—who helps Remy ease Wes onto the table. His legs dangle off the end, and he doesn't protest. He's lost consciousness now.

I want to yell and ask what a vet is going to do for him now, but he turns and grabs a couple bags of blood from the little cooler behind him. "Is that human?"

It's a stupid question—I doubt they'd try to resuscitate him with pig blood, though he probably deserves that. The better question, really, is *why* he has that. "Type O." The doctor confirms, setting about grabbing things. "Universal donor. I always keep it on hand for emergencies."

My eyebrows raise of their own accord, but I decide it's best not to ask anything more. A veterinarian who keeps human blood on hand for emergencies is probably involved in more than just checking on household pets. I take a step back, sure that I shouldn't be here, and yet Remy isn't moving. He stands with his hands braced on the edge of the table, his broad shoulders tense and his shoulders hunched as he waits for something.

There's a flash of silver as the doctor brandishes scissors, and then he cuts Wes' shirt off, exposing his work surface. I turn away then—I can't see

him like this. In such a fragile state, it's hard to reconcile this man with the vicious asshole who would have easily handed me off to his father so I could be passed off to a stranger as some little plaything. I can feel my throat threatening to close, so I focus on breathing through my nose and looking at the posters on the walls. The majority of them are in Spanish, which I don't know enough of to deduce anything coherent, but the pictures of dogs and cats and their anatomy is a good distraction until the doctor's muttered curse draws me back to the matter at hand.

"What?" Remy demands. His tone suggests that the doctor would be wise to figure out whatever the problem is.

"It's not enough blood. I can see the bullet—it didn't nick anything important, but if I take it out, I could graze his small intestines. It's right there."

"You've done this before." Remy snaps. I've never heard him take that sort of attitude with someone who didn't do anything to warrant it—it feels oddly uncomfortable.

"Yes." The doctor nods without glancing up from his work. I'm far away enough that I can't see anything beyond whatever silver instrument he's got inserted into Wes' stomach, and that's more than enough for me. "But if I hit that I don't have enough blood to patch him up. I barely have enough as it is."

"So, leave the bullet and sew him up." Remy commands.

The doctor nods and lifts a needle with thick, black thread already looped through it, at which point I turn away again to study the posters on the wall. The din of their conversation and the sounds of various instruments clanging against metal fade into the background as I focus on calming the storm in my head—the angel and demon are in all-out war over whether this was a waste of our time, whether it was the right thing to do.

But I already know there's no such thing as right and wrong. The world doesn't exist in black and white, as easy as that would be to navigate. I'm not sure how much time passes that way as I stare into the void of my soul. I consider for a moment going out to the hall and seeing if there's a dog or cat out of the kennels I can pick up, but before I can act on the impulse, the doctor's muttering pulls me back into the moment.

"What now?" Remy grits out, his jaw clenched. He looks like he'd very much like to punch the doctor. I'm not sure what the extent of their relationship is, but it's clearly not too deep.

“I can’t do anything else without more blood. Do you know his type?”

“Why would I know that?” Remy shakes his head. “You’ve patched him up. The rest is in fate’s hands. Call me when he wakes up… or doesn’t.” He turns, grabbing me by the shoulder and leading me toward the door.

“Wait!” I shake myself out of his grip and dart toward the doctor. “I’m O negative.”

“Claire.” Remy’s voice is full of warning.

“Can’t you take my blood?”

The doctor blinks at me from behind his wire-framed glasses. “I could, yes.”

“So, do it.”

“No.”

An arm snakes around my waist, hauling me against Remy’s chest. I can feel the tension rolling off of him before I even look up into his face. I step out of his grip just enough to prove the words I’m about to speak. “You don’t get to decide this.”

“You don’t get to risk your life for him!” Remy counters. His eyes are smoldering. If I thought he was mad before, he’s livid now, and it’s equal parts terrifying and exhilarating.

“It’s a blood transfusion, not a kidney transplant.”

“You’re not doing it.” He says the words with an air of finality, grabbing my wrist in one of his hands and making to pull me toward the door again.

“You have no say in what I do with my body.” I snap. “We’ve fucked around a few times, but that’s all we are to each other. You don’t get to say if I give my blood any more than you get to say who I fuck when you decide I’m not worthy of your time.”

For one second, I think he’s going to grab me around the waist and throw me over his shoulder, but the unhinged look in his eyes fades as quickly as it came. “Fine.” He crosses his arms over his chest and turns his hard gaze on the doctor. “Make it quick.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

Claire looks almost smug as she sits across from me with her forearm resting against the armrest as Garcia rubs a wet alcohol pad over her skin. I hold her gaze, refusing to back down even as she winces at the first poke of the needle. Garcia mutters something under his breath, tilts his head, and then shakes it. “Missed.” He says, almost apologetically.

Claire attempts a smile, but it turns to a wince when he pokes her again without finding his mark. “Stubborn veins.” He says, as if that’s an excuse.

I hate everything about this—most of all that it’s being dragged out by his inability to do a preliminary part of his job. I’d think human veins are easier to find, and yet he’s groping around with the needle like a blind man looking for his girlfriend’s clit.

“If you miss again, I’ll stab that needle through your fucking eye.” I snap.

“Remy!” Claire gasps, eyes round with shock and those pink lips parted.

Whether for fear of being stabbed or because he finally pushes his glasses up his nose to see, Garcia gets the needle in on the third try and sets about making little adjustments to the system he’s set up. I think he’s avoiding my gaze, but Claire certainly isn’t. She’s staring at me, contemplating my threat, and probably wondering if I can make good on a promise like that. My sweet little lamb has no idea just how depraved I am—I’ve held it back for her. But the way she looks at me makes me think she wants it all. And she deserves it.

I’ve never wanted to choke someone as much as I want to wrap my hands around her slender little throat right now. I’m doing a good job of reigning

it in, but I'm seething. And it doesn't let up—not when she winces at the prick of the needle, not when her blood starts to fill the tube, and not when I push the doctor to the side and tell him, "That's enough".

I know a thing or two about blood loss, and I don't care how much blood Wes needs. Claire's too small to give as much as the doctor is taking.

He doesn't fight me as he stems the flow of blood, drawing the needle out of her vein, which is a stark blue against her fair skin. He presses a cotton ball to the puncture, tapes it off, and turns promptly to Wes, who could be dead for all I can tell. He's not hooked up to any monitors, but there's a gentle rise and fall of his chest as I move toward Claire.

She stands too quickly, losing her balance and reaching out into thin air for something to catch her fall. I catch her against my side, and she winces as the tender spot on her arm brushes against my back. Garcia called her veins stubborn—fitting since everything about her seems to be stubborn. "Call me," I command, moving toward the door with Claire pressed against my chest.

"I can walk." Claire says. "And we should stay until he wakes up."

"Not a fucking chance." I snatch her around the waist and transfer her weight over my shoulder just to prove my point.

"Remy!" She hisses. "Put me down!"

"I'm not having you faint on me. I'll put you down when we get back on the boat."

Her protests are drowned out by the howls of the animals as we walk back through the hallway and exit into the late afternoon. The sky is darker now, just like my mood, but I don't care. We're due for a storm, but I'm not watching her fawn over my brother another minute. I've got to get out of here before I kill Wes myself for being someone she'd give *anything* to. I don't understand how she can after all that he nearly took from her, but I don't think that's what bothers me most. What I hate most is that she looks at him like a wounded puppy, like she can fix him.

Claire's given up on fighting, swaying against me with every step until I carry her over the threshold of the boat and into the cabin. "You can put me down now." She snaps, clearly annoyed with me.

But I'm more than annoyed. I'm furious with her.

I don't put her down. I carry her past the fucking crime scene that my kitchen has become and to the small bedroom at the back. There's a trail of blood leading to the bathroom, but I'm glad he at least had the decency to

not ruin my mattress. Most everything else can be cleaned, though I may have to buy new cushions for the seats.

I throw Claire down onto the perfectly made bed with a little more force than necessary. “Stay.”

It’s all I can manage without losing my patience entirely, and I’d rather not do that with her. But Claire has tested me from the first moment I saw her. It took everything in me not to take her that night, not to throw her against that dresser and see just how innocent she really was. I held back because of my sister, because I wanted to keep her insulated from this sordid lifestyle that I inherited, but it took so much out of me to control myself. And I got good at controlling myself, made it look like it was something I did as a habit.

But Rhea knows everything, and Claire is fucking with my head, and I’m done playing nice.

“I’m not a dog.” Claire growls, sounding very much feral. There’s anger in her voice, but beneath it is a hint of delicious indignation.

I know better than to take the bait, but my brain doesn’t have any say as I spin back to face her. “Oh? Could have fooled me.”

She’s scrambled up from where I tossed her on her back to sitting on her knees, likely in an attempt to not look so vulnerable. Her eyes are angry, her energy matching mine. She wants to fight as much as I do. “Which means *what*?”

“Meaning you were fawning over my brother like a bitch in heat.” I sneer, relishing the way her eyes go wide at the insult.

“I wasn’t *fawning* over him!”

“Could have fooled me.” As much as I want the fight, I also want to put distance between us so that I can think without her occupying my every thought, breathe without her in every breath. My hand is on the doorknob, my mind made up to go, but she draws me back like a fish on a line. She’s got her hooks in me so deep she could gut me, and I’d ask her for more. Everything about her is trouble, and I need to put a definite end to anything and everything between us for her sake and mine. I don’t know what we have, but it’s toxic. I’ve never known anyone to bring these feelings out of me, to make me jealous by simply being in the presence of another man, to make me want to hurt her as much as I want to fuck her.

“If I’m a bitch in heat, what are you? You act like you’re too good for me, then pull me in just to push me away. You kiss me, and then you accuse me

of murder. You fuck me, and then you practically beg for my attention. You kill with me and then tell me we'll never amount to anything!" She's practically yelling, her chest heaving with her anger. "You tell me we only have one night, and you take every second of that night, and then you get jealous when I *exist* in the same room as your brother! This isn't about me, Remy. It's about you and your mommy issues."

That comment sears into my skin, but I cover it with a laugh as I turn back to face her. "Mommy *and* daddy issues, Claire. Just like you."

My rebuttal doesn't bother her. She doesn't even flinch, her cool stare burning through me. "So, we're both fucked up."

"*You* make me this way." I argue. Maybe it's not fair to put that on her, but I was doing just fine before she came along, mommy issues and all. "*You* bring it out of me."

"So, take it out on me."

She says it so calmly that she could be telling me to change the paint color on my walls. Despite the coolness of her words, her eyes are on fire, branding me with her gaze. I know what she's suggesting, and my blood is already so hot from the rage filling it that I don't stand a chance of telling her no. I close the space between us in a few short steps and pin her to the mattress with my hand on her neck. Her breath escapes her as she falls onto her back, staring up at me with those bright eyes. They don't show a flicker of fear. She trusts me—craves my chaos, needs my anger. I don't know what it says about us that we both get more from this depraved exchange than simple pleasure, but I don't fucking care. I don't care about anything right now.

"A bitch in heat needs a collar," I tell her, stroking my thumb over the delicate column of her throat. I'm not squeezing, not applying any pressure. The suggestion is all I need right now. Claire's eyes are blazing with desire, the heat between us approaching a flash point. We're fire and gasoline, rage and chaos. All of our soft sides are gone—the pure, the genuine, the innocent. It's all been stripped away by our passion, leaving only wicked desire in its wake. I'm drunk on the power she's giving me, addicted to the rush brought on by her existence.

I want her to keep fighting me, but a moan slips out of her throat instead. And my cock constricts, along with everything inside of me. I think of ripping her shorts down to her ankles and filling her so fast that she screams at the intrusion. But she's a flame, and I'm a moth. I'll burn myself trying to

get to her, so I just shake my head. The more I fuck her, the less I want to do anything else.

I move off of her, every part of me tense enough I'm surprised I don't just shatter when she laughs. "That's it?"

I pause, my knees still on either side of her hips. "What?"

"I didn't take you for the kind to tap out." She laughs, her breasts bouncing in her tank top.

"I'm not tapping out."

"Are you scared of me Remy?"

No. I'm not scared of this little angelic girl with a dark side that she hasn't even begun to explore the depths of. I *am* scared of what she does to me, what she brings out of me. When I don't answer, she laughs again. "Pussy."

It takes me a moment to register that she really just said that, and by that point, I don't give a fuck about anything beyond this moment. I squeeze the sides of her neck, applying just enough pressure to remind her that she's trying to pick a fight with a fucking killer. But Claire only arches off the bed, her hips searching for me. "So brave," I whisper, licking my lips as my mind runs through all the different things that I could do to show her that she's playing with fire. "So stupid."

"So.. angry." She gasps, her breath coming in pants despite the fact I'm not squeezing hard enough to choke off her air supply.

"You like me angry?" I snarl, slipping a finger into the waistband of her shorts and sliding it around, pulling the fabric off of her, testing it. She opens her mouth to give me an answer, but I don't let her say whatever it is. I move my other hand off her neck, slipping my fingers through the loops of her pants and jerking them off of her in a single motion. I'm not delicate. The fabric chafes against her skin as I rip them over her knees, tossing them out of my way.

Her black bikini doesn't betray how wet I'm willing to bet she is, but I don't need it to. All it takes is a tug on one string, then the other, and she's exposed to me. Even as she tries to press her thighs together, I see that she's glistening. My little vixen gets off on the anger, and that's fine with me because I'm so frustrated with her that my choices are only to fuck her within an inch of her life or kill her.

This way is a lot more fun.

“You look a little wet.” I tell her, relishing the scarlet that blooms immediately on her cheeks, spreading across her chest, just above those gorgeous tits she’s hiding from me. I remedy that by gripping the neckline in my hands and tearing. She gasps in shock as it shreds down the middle, and then I cover her body with mine and tug on the knot behind her top, too.

When she spills out of the top, I think my cock is going to burst through my pants, but I force myself to wait as I climb on top of her, taking her wrist in one hand and threading the strings of her own bikini around them, securing her to the headboard with her arms raised, immobilized. The rise and fall of her chest betrays the brave face she’s trying to put on.

“Scared?” I taunt.

“No.” Her answer is immediate… too quick. I laugh, unbuckling my belt and wrenching it free in a single motion.

“I think you’re lying.” I croon, watching her chest rise a little faster as I crawl up her body, surveying every inch of what is displayed before me. The mostly healed cut on her chest is the only betrayal that not even two weeks ago, she was stolen from me and sold off like secondhand art. I hate that fucking scar, so I flip my eyes to hers.

I’m right in front of her, close enough to reach out and take what I want.

“Do you want me to be scared?” She challenges. Her bright eyes betray a hint of what she’s denying, but mostly they burn with anger and desire.

Yes.

And no.

I want her to run from me and never look back. I want her to have the good sense to realize that I won’t give her anything… all I can do is take. And I will take more than she should give. I will ruin her. But I’m scared too, of how much I *want* to ruin her. I’ve never been one to hurt people for fun, but I am so addicted to our toxic game of push and pull, so addicted to her, that I feel myself pushing boundaries I never even realized I set.

This isn’t me.

“I want you to have the sense not to help those who would hurt you. You fucking gave him your blood. And he would have taken every drop of yours if his daddy hadn’t had his own plans for you.”

“You like talking about him when your cock is pressing into my stomach?” She asks, her breath hitching as if she can’t believe she asked that. As if I needed another reminder that she’s woefully unprepared for the

world she’s found herself in. She can’t even say dirty words without blushing, and I fucking love it.

“No.” I tell her honestly. “Not at all.”

“So, you should probably stop.” She hedges, her voice breathy. “Talking about him, I mean.”

I can’t help myself. I laugh, happy to oblige her. Our conversation is far from over, but right now, I have a more pressing issue at hand.

She treats my laugh like praise, glowing a little as it washes over her. I stand, ripping my shirt over my head and letting it fall to the ground. My pants come next, and my boxers along with them, so that when my cock springs free, she shifts a little in anticipation… or fear. “What do you want?” I ask, watching her eyes rake over me, still a little flushed, her lips parted like she needs just a little extra room to breathe.

“I want you.” Her throat bobs as she contemplates what else she has to say. And then she seems to think better of whatever thoughts are in her head, because she shakes her head. “I mean, I want you to fuck me.”

And who am I to deny her? I spread myself over her again, chuckling as she squirms under me even though her eyes don’t leave mine. She wants this, she’s asking for it, her body is practically begging. I swipe the pad of my thumb along her slit, testing my theory. She’s so wet, so silky smooth, that I groan in anticipation of how it’s going to feel when I push my cock into her. I’m going to go slow, making her desperate for every inch of me. I want her to burn for me.

“You sound so cute using bad words like you’re not the most innocent person I’ve ever met.” I slip a single finger inside her and swirl, enjoying the feel of her warm walls enveloping me, not too quick to pump it in and out of her.

“I’m not that innocent,” she snaps.

I decide to test that claim, slipping my coated thumb from her and gliding lower, pressing firmly on her asshole. I watch her face as I do it, see the way her eyes widen, her lips part like she’s thinking of telling me to stop, and a breath rolls through her, escaping as a moan. I also feel her tense under me, every part of her rigid. Even if she thinks she’s willing to try this, her body is afraid. She *is* innocent, no matter how much she tries to claim the opposite. “You’ve never been touched here,” I say, my words whispering over her full, pink lips.

It's not a question, but she answers anyway. “No…” Her breath hitches when the pressure increases, waiting to see if I take it further. “But I want to.”

My cock throbs at that admission, an ache that demands soothing. “You want to be touched here?” I ask, rolling my thumb in a slow circle that gently kneads the muscle. “I’m already touching you here.”

“I—” She looks frustrated, her eyes closing as she cants her head back. I’m not sure if she’s searching for patience or the words to finish that thought. “I want more. I want you… inside me.”

I didn’t expect that, but I love the way her cheeks burn. Her skin is so hot under mine, heated with the blood rushing through her veins, the heart that’s hammering beneath me. But her wetness has already dried on my finger, and now the friction of skin on skin is making that request a little hard to come by. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” her eyes fly open, but she drags her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’m sure. *Please*.” My cock jumps against her soft skin hearing the plea, but I don’t waste another minute. The power she’s giving me over her is too much to deny her.

“Then you’re gonna need to relax, sweetheart.”

She nods, letting go of a slow breath… a measured breath, controlled. She’s not relaxed, but she will be. I grip her thighs and slide between them so quickly that she sits up, confused at the sudden change. I think she’s about to object to my denial, but then my hot breath whispers over her pussy, and her head falls back against the headboard.

She’s so warm, so soft, and so damn sweet that I could do this all night. I’m not here to make a whole meal out of her right now, but I’m also not going to devour her in a single go. I press kisses to her thighs, her ass, her mound, each sigh and shiver she gives me swelling through me. And then I dart my tongue over her clit, working slow circles right over the top of her until her sounds get louder and her moans get closer together. “Remy,” she chokes on my name, on the need. “Please.”

I’d ask her what she means if my mouth wasn’t busy—I pull her into it, her sweet little nub disappearing in my mouth. Claire’s cry is so beautiful it only encourages me to bring her faster to that cliff so that I can join her. I nip her, using the suction to hold her in place while my tongue rolls over the sensitive tip. And she withers, falling apart around me until I release her.

She’s still curling her fingers, trying to grab hold of something even though her orgasm just scattered her to pieces, judging by the crescendo of sounds that came from her. Before she’s even fallen silent, I use the grip I still have on her hips to drag her further down the bed, the delicate strings of her bikini pulling away from the headboard with the force. Probably for the best, because when I roll her onto her knees, at least her hands are free to catch herself.

Dipping into her pussy, I find her slippery and slick, so ready for me to slide in and take her. But it’s only a finger I slide in, dragging her wetness back to her ass and pressing into her with more force than before. She clenches, surprised at the speed and then I hear an exhale as the muscle relaxes.

I sink inside of her up to a knuckle, relishing the warmth, her moan as she squeezes around me and then, seeming to realize it, she relaxes. That’s the easy part, the part that feels good. She has no idea how much further I can go, how much more she can take. And honestly, neither do I. But I’m going to find out. “Rem…”

“You’re in control, Claire. You have to tell me what you want.”

I’m lying. I will follow her directions, but I am exercising an unbelievable amount of control right now, resisting the urge to *make* her take more, to spread her and stretch her until my cock can slide easily into the space she’s tempting me with.

“More.” She doesn’t even hesitate, and neither do I, sliding in the rest of the way, letting her adjust to the feel for only a second before pulling back. She sucks in a sharp breath on the retreat, but I don’t make her wait long before I’m filling her again with a second finger.

Her moan is choked by pain, but she brings her hips back to meet me. “Is this what you want?”

“Y-yes.”

She doesn’t dare move as I explore her channel, easing through her and back out. “How does it feel?”

“It—” She sighs, “It’s good. I want you…”

I hesitate. “You want me to fuck you here?”

“Please,” I can’t see her face, but her voice is quiet and I’m willing to bet those cheeks are on fire with her embarrassment. She sounds ashamed to be asking for this.

“Don’t be afraid to ask for what you want.” I tell her, leaving the rest of my thoughts unspoken. *Because there’s no way I could say no to you.* “There are ways to make your first time easier.”

It’s not like I keep toys on hand, but if she wants this, I’ll gladly take her shopping. Or maybe I’ll come to my senses before we make it. Either way, I need to give her the option. “I don’t want easier,” She whimpers. “I want you. *Now*.”

I should tell her no. It doesn’t seem like a good idea to do something so intimate with a woman I already am going to have a hard time parting ways with. But the same thought runs through my mind from just a few seconds ago. I can’t say no to her, particularly when I want this as bad as she does.

She turns to look at me as I shift off of her, but I make quick work of darting to the bathroom, ignoring my stupid ass half-brother’s blood trails and grabbing the bottle of aloe vera I keep in the bathroom cabinet. As soon as she sees what I have in hand, she eases into the bed, remembering that I told her she’d have to relax.

“Remember that you’re in control.” I’m not sure I can ever remind her of that too much, but I hope if it annoys her, she’ll just tell me to shut up. “If you need me to stop, tell me that. If you need me to go slower, tell me that. Okay?”

Claire makes some unintelligible noise, so I grab a fistful of her blonde hair, pulling her face out of the mattress. “Okay?” I repeat.

“Yes,” she gasps, giving me all I need.

The aloe is cold, but it’s almost soothing on my hot cock; I’ve been burning for her for too long. She jumps a little at the sudden coldness as I coat her hole with the viscous jelly, and then stills just as suddenly as I push three fingers inside, letting them coat the path that I’m about to follow. I don’t want to give her too long to adjust to the feeling, so I slide out as quickly as I went in and line myself up at her entrance. “Breathe.”

She doesn’t need more than that command, letting go of the air she’d been holding hostage as I begin to push into her. My crown spears her, and as I push the tip in, she moans. I focus on going slow, controlling myself. It’s agonizing, but so would be having to stop because the pain is too much.

I should have known better. She’s not weak, not afraid of pain. She asked me last night to hurt her, and she asked for me to do the same thing in a different way by initiating this. Claire doesn’t back down, doesn’t ask me to stop. I watch her nails dig into the comforter, her fingers curling as she

takes the pain out on my bedspread. I bring my mouth to her ear, pulling the lobe into my mouth and nipping at it as I slip further.

I can feel her skin dampening with sweat, her hair mussed from where I grabbed it so indelicately. I've got a grip on her hips, keeping her in position as I sink inside. When I meet with resistance, she squeezes around me, her body trying to force out the intrusion. "I—I can'—"

"Don't tell me you can't," I tell her. "You can take it. But if you want me to stop—"

"No," she gasps, shaking her head. "Stop asking."

I chuckle a little, unable to help myself. "Open up for me, then."

Realizing she's too tense, she breathes in and then out, her body relaxing. I take advantage, forcing her to accommodate me. Once I'm past the ring of muscle, I pull her hips back onto me, making her take the rest of me all at once. She gasps out, her head jerking up, her breath a series of tremors. "I—I don't think I can."

The hard part isn't just getting it in. It's the retreat, the feeling of the body trying to return to normal before it's time. I give her a minute to adjust to feeling so full, to knowing she's doing something that some people call filthy, disgusting, sordid. When I hear her get control of her breath, I pull back, almost all the way.

When I thrust back in, she cries out. The sound is so desperate I almost force myself to stop, but then I hear her whimper. "Keep going."

I do, even as her breath comes in jolts that shake her entire body and her ass squeezes me like she's gonna choke the life from me. And just before I find a rhythm with my strokes, I reach around to her pussy to find she's absolutely dripping. The pain is feeding her pleasure, doing exactly what she wants. And I'm only going to take her higher. I slide my fingers to her clit, rubbing a circle over her. "Ohhhh," Her moan is drawn out with the ecstasy, so that when I pull back this time, she doesn't tense, doesn't push me out.

I bury myself in her over and over again, sliding effortlessly in and out until it gets hard to focus on anything other than maintaining the rhythm. "Fuck," she cries, her breath hitching. I can feel her tightening, fighting the impending orgasm.

"You make the prettiest fucking sounds." I tell her, wrapping my arm around her waist so that it's digging into her stomach, keeping her still as I double my pace.

This isn’t the first time she’s come for me, come on me, but it’s the first time she comes so relentlessly. The air is filled with the sound of her screams, whimpers, sobs, and gasps. She rotates between them as the orgasm takes hold of her, pleasure rolling into pain, pain rolling into exhaustion, exhaustion turning to euphoria.

I guess she’s not worried about anyone hearing her out here, because she’s totally thrown caution to the wind. I’m pretty sure they can hear us from the shore, and I vaguely hope that Wes is alive to hear the sounds I’m pulling from her.

We’re both covered in sweat by the time I’m at the edge. She’s limp, her body thoroughly fucked and worn out, her cries and gasps turning to whispers and moans. I’m all that holds her up, and I’ve taken my fingers off her, giving her a chance to rest.

I hit her hard with one last thrust, my balls slapping against her swollen clit, and unleash a groan as I spill into her. My hot seed floods her, and I work to get every last drop into her before easing out.

She collapses the minute I move my arm out from around her, her arms shaking, and her body spent. Her hair falls in a tangled mess over one shoulder. I don’t even stop to think about what I’m doing when I press my lips to the top of her spine, watching her entire body shudder with my kiss.

She doesn’t move when I get up and run a cloth under warm water. It takes all of thirty seconds, but by the time I’m back to her side, she’s lifting her heavy eyes to look at me, dazed. I press the washcloth between her legs, and she jerks awake, surprised as she bats her hand away from me. “I’m just cleaning you up.”

“I can do that.” She looks affronted by my attempt, but it’s not discomfort on her face or in her eyes.

It’s embarrassment.

I lean into her, pressing my mouth to hers and making quick work of cleaning my cum out from between her legs. By the time I’m done and stop kissing her, she’s staring at me, her mouth open, her eyes confused.

“I can clean up my own messes, sweetheart.”

She stays stunned, silent as I take the cloth and drop it in the sink. I should get dressed and take us back to the house. I *shouldn’t* have called her sweetheart. I also shouldn’t have fucked her again. And I definitely shouldn’t lay down beside her and pull her against me.

But I do just that, wrapping an arm around her and dragging her to my side, cocooning her warm body against mine. Her head rolls onto my chest, her cheeks flush with my skin as I listen to the sound of the rain starting up outside, the cadence of our breaths.

It's peaceful. Honestly, I'm not sure the last time I've ever felt so at peace. She's safe in my arms and Rhea is safe with Dimitri, and for the first time since my dad died, I feel secure in that knowledge. Even before he died, I was always on guard, wondering if he'd do something stupid, wondering if that would be the day my sister's world shattered and she learned the truth about our family. I'm not sure I've felt this at ease since the night before I was taken to Amsterdam, the last time I had Monica in my arms, the last time the world didn't seem like hell.

Something wet drops against my skin, and I chuckle, thinking Claire's already passed out so hard she's drooling on me. "Asleep already?" I tease.

She shakes her head the slightest bit, and more moisture pools on my chest. I catch her chin in my hand, and she tilts her head back to look at me. She tries to wipe the tears away before I see them, but they're streaking her face, cutting silent paths down her cheeks.

I tense, an ache in my gut as I sit up, appraising her. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

Claire is quick to shake her head, but the tears gathering in her eyes beg to differ. Clearly, something is wrong. "No."

"Did I hurt you?" I'm confused, to say the least. Not even five minutes ago she was coming harder than I bet she ever has. "Are you mad that I—"

"No." She doesn't give me a chance to finish. "It's not you."

"Well, you and I are the only ones here, so unless there's something you want to tell me, I'm assuming it was me."

"No. I don't know why I'm crying." She shakes her head, dragging her hands over the last of her tears, and then lays down on me again. Her sniffle is the last betrayal of whatever is wrong, and then she sighs. "I think I'm just tired."

Of course she's tired. I'm tired and I haven't been through half the shit she has.

I press my lips to her forehead, and then reach around to thread my fingers through hers.

We both just need to rest a minute.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I don’t remember falling asleep, but when I wake up, it’s dark in the cabin. My eyelashes flutter against something as I wake, confusion parting as I pull away from the warm body beneath me and realization hits me.

Remy.

I fell asleep on him?

It’s somehow embarrassing. In our interactions, we’ve been giving and taking in equal measure. It’s been working so well. And then he went and gave me the greatest orgasm I have ever had—maybe the greatest one to ever exist. I wanted his anger, his rage, his wrath. But somehow this time feels different. It’s like I’m his whore who was supposed to slink away after the deed was done with him still between my thighs—that way it wouldn’t mean anything. Instead, we literally slept together.

Now I know why Rhea was losing her shit earlier. The bubble of panic in my stomach has me feeling nauseous, the air too warm. And yet, his arm is wrapped around me, his skin pressed against my back so that as I try to peel myself off of him, I hold my breath, trying not to wake him.

I’m sore, my body aching in the best way. I close my eyes as I slip out from under his arm, just in case his pop open to find me desperately trying to escape him. Somehow, that would be even more mortifying.

But he’s completely passed out, barely even stirring when I let his arm drop to the pillow at his side and roll off the bed to find my discarded clothes. My bikini top ended up on the floor, my shorts are halfway across the room, and the bottoms of my swimsuit are draped off the side of the bed

like they were left to serve as a sign of my submission. I make quick work of tying the knots and tucking away all the tits and bits, slipping my shorts on like I'm racing the damn clock. As if he hasn't seen me in anything less than my bikini.

When I reach for my shirt, I remember that he ripped it right down the middle like an animal. I guess I don't need it on the boat anyway, and it's not like there's anywhere for me to go to sneak away from him. But I can't be here in this room any longer, so I slip out of the room, fully intending to go sit on the deck and wait for him to wake up so he can take us back to his house.

But I freeze as soon as the door is shut behind me, seeing all the blood still splashed across the shiny floor. It's a mess out here—I honestly don't know how Wes will survive all that blood he lost. Even with giving him some of mine, seeing how much was spilled, I don't know what will come of him.

My stomach twists at the thought, which makes me irrationally angry. I know I shouldn't care what happens to him. He wasn't going to care what happened to me. Honestly, if I was the one bleeding in front of him, he'd probably fuck me before passing me off to his father.

My blood is heating by the time I stalk over to the cabinet under the sink and pull out a spray bottle without a label. A quick whiff once I uncap it proves it's bleach, and for a moment I wonder why this is the only cleaning solution to be found. Then I remember he's fucking rich. He probably has Elaine come out to clean his boat or something. But there's also the fact that he kills people, and maybe the boat is just a convenient spot for that. Take them out where no one can hear them scream and throw them where no one will find them. Isn't that what he threatened me with the first time he brought me out here?

I ignore the burgeoning rage in my chest and grab a hand towel off the counter, setting about cleaning up. I don't bother looking for gloves. I just scrub the floor clean until the rag is so thick with blood, all I'm doing is spreading it around, so I run it under the sink, wring it out, and repeat.

I'm not letting myself think as I work, focused on the task at hand— the circular motions, the smell of the bleach, the up and down as I wring the cloth out and then drop back onto my knees again and again. I hope the gentle pitter patter I hear means that the rain has washed most of the blood

off the deck outside, and I'm honestly exhausted by the time I finish, leaning on the sink as I wring the cloth out one last time.

Blood pools in the basin, the water running red as it drips from the cloth. I drop it onto the counter and focus on scrubbing my hands, which seem to be permanently tinted red. The harder I scrub at them, the redder they get until I can *feel* the blood on them. Not Wes'… Eric's.

My chest is tight as the tears blur my vision. I don't even know what I'm crying for by the time I turn the water off and wipe my hands on a clean towel.

"You cleaned?" Remy's voice makes me jump, so that when I turn to face him, my heart hammers so hard I press my palm against it. He's quiet as he takes me in, giving me a little chance to blink away the tears before his eyes turn to mine.

But it's too late. Recognition darkens his eyes as they flit over me and then back to my hands. "Were you trying to bathe in the bleach?" He asks, stepping closer to me and seizing my wrists so that he can inspect my hands. They're still red, though now that I look at them, I can see it's from the irritation of the bleach and the hot water.

"Sorry," I tell him, trying to rip out of his touch. His fingers tighten on my wrists, so I abandon the fight, meeting his eyes. "I just wanted to… make myself useful."

"You're already plenty useful." He says, eyeing me thoughtfully. It sets a fire in my stomach, but also makes me clench around nothing, feeling how hollow I am.

I can't even dignify that with a response, so I inhale a sharp breath and gesture to the windows that look out at the dark night. From in here, you can't even tell the sea from the sky. Something about that makes my chest ache more.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

"It's late."

Remy arches an eyebrow, like he's amused by my elementary assessment. He's just opening his mouth when his phone rings. But he doesn't let go of my gaze as he reaches into his back pocket to grab his phone, answering it without ever checking the caller ID. "Hello?"

The volume is up all the way, or else the person on the other end of the line is yelling. Either way, I hear it when the man says, "He's gone!"

My first thought is Dimitri and Rhea. Surely, they must be wondering where the hell we ended up. I was supposed to be playing a little game with Rhea when I ended up on the boat. “I’m sorry,” Remy says calmly, blinking at me. “What do you mean, he’s *gone*?”

“He was sedated when I left him. I went to bed, woke up to the silent alarm going off back at the clinic.”

The clinic.

So, Wes lives to fight another day.

Unless he’s a zombie who died on the table then got up to amble away, he survived. I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about that. Relieved? Afraid? I’m neither. But Remy knows how he feels. His face goes sharp, his rugged features turning severe as every part of him tenses. “You let him get away?” He’s grinding the words out from a clenched jaw, and I just watch him. My heart is racing, but I don’t know what is making it gallop harder—the impending explosion or the fact that, against all odds, Wes *lived*.

“I didn’t let him do anything, Boudreaux. I left because I have a family to get home to. I help you when I can, but that doesn’t mean I’m a babysitter.”

Remy doesn’t miss a beat… or explode. “You think your family would like to know you save the lives of murderers and criminals for enough cash to powder your nose?”

The doctor mutters something to himself before a hefty sigh issues from the other line. “No, I don’t want them to know.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Remy snaps. “I should have your fucking head for this. Maybe just a hand?”

My heart stills so suddenly my chest aches.

“Remington, I…”

“No excuses.” He shakes his head, though I’m not entirely sure it’s meant for the man who can’t see him. “You disappoint me, doctor. You know I don’t bring business to you because you’re the best. You just have the best fees of all of them. Of course, dead people are of no use to me, so I’d be forced to seek out your competition. Hector Valdez is worth the price he charges.”

The doctor’s shaky exhale reaches through the phone, and his voice wobbles when he says, “I—I’m sorry.”

“Mm.” Remy nods, noncommittally. “I don’t think you are. But you will be.”

He doesn’t offer a chance for response, ending the call and tossing the phone on the counter with a disappointed sigh before turning his eyes to me. “I…” My throat feels thick and tight, making words hard to come by. “That was cruel.”

“Cruel?” He chuckles, closing the space between us so that his body presses into mine, backing me against the counter. I grab hold of the edges, needing something to close my hands on, something to ground me. “You think it was cruel to warn a drug addict that I was going to cut him off? You think it’s cruel to take his life before the powder can?”

“You don’t get to decide.” I say, my voice surprisingly confident. It only increases when I clear my throat, square my shoulders, and tilt my chin up to look at him defiantly. “What makes you the man who gets to take other people’s lives?”

“Because I’m the man with the gun. Or the man with the plan. Or the one who pulls the strings. It’s quite easy to take a life, Claire. Messy, sure. Unpleasant, yes. But easy if you don’t let the guilt control you… but then you know all about the guilt.”

The guilt.

I’m sure it’s why I’ve been on edge, why I feel like I’m falling apart, why I want to cry. I’ve never known guilt like this, even though I was so certain at the time that what Remy and I did was justified. Now, I’m not so sure. Did the couple who brought me into this world plan for this to be my legacy? Is that why they abandoned me, dumping me in the lap of a broken foster care system so that they wouldn’t have to deal with it? Maybe that was their legacy, too. Maybe darkness is in my bloodstream, keeping me alive. Maybe I have to feed it to keep it alive because if I starve it, I’ll kill a part of myself I haven’t yet learned how to give up.

“He deserved it.” My voice trembles even to my own ears. Remy surely hears it, too. He only laughs at me, cold, distant.

“Deserved it *why*? Because you said so? Because I did?”

“Because he hurt innocent girls!”

Remy’s beautiful face is blurry with the tears in my eyes, but anger is igniting in my veins to chase it away. I’m so fucking tired of crying, of feeling sick, anxious, scared, nauseous. I’m sick of feeling anything but free because that’s what I am. I got myself emancipated so that I could get out of the cage I was kept in, and when I did, I learned how far my wings could reach, how high I could fly. But I’m not flying, not spreading my wings.

I’m torturing myself because I did an unforgiveable thing. And part of me knows that trying to spare Wes’ life was just a Hail Mary attempt to clear my guilty conscience.

“Because I told you he did. I gave you a police file, and you believed me, as if it wouldn’t be hard to make that up. You killed him because I told you to… *because I pull the strings*.”

The damn tears won’t go away no matter how furiously I try to blink past them. “You lied to me?”

Remy’s lips curve into a smirk, so delicious I could close the space between us and cover his mouth with my own. But I’m too shocked, devastated. The fire in my veins seconds ago has turned so quickly to ice, that it’s visceral, painful. A cold chill runs down my spine, and a shudder follows it. “Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t. Maybe those girls were just more of Davos’ victims.” He shrugs. “In the end, do you think that matters? We either just cease to exist, in which case, what does any of it matter? Or we get judged for what we did with our time. Do you think that the judge is really going to examine the circumstances before he delivers his verdict? Do you think his idea of right and wrong and maybe wrong and mostly right is going to align with what you believe?”

The betrayal I feel is unfounded, but it’s there anyway… sharp and cold like a knife between the ribs. Or a knife between the breasts, cutting just deep enough to mark. “If you want me to feel bad, I don’t.”

“Because I told you not to.” He challenges. “I gave you an excuse to feel justified in what you did. But if I take that reason away, what do you have?”

Anger.

Guilt.

Remy warned me it would stain my soul.

“Why are you doing this?” I swallow the tears, collecting myself enough to steady my trembling lip. I thought I was getting over the guilt. But all of a sudden, I feel like it’s eating me alive.

“Because I’ve been too soft with you, Claire.” He lets his gaze drop, and then skate over me again. “I didn’t want to scare you. From the first minute I saw you, I knew you were either a doe who scares easily or a fox dressed as one. Now I know… you’re a doe through and through.” I don’t know if I should be offended by that assessment. “You’re soft and gentle and sweet. I convinced you to kill Giante because I wanted to know, once and for all, if you were a fox or a doe. And now I know.”

“So, you lied to me?”

“Does it matter?” He challenges, toeing my feet apart and wedging himself in the space he creates. My body tenses, craving him.

“Of course it matters.” My head hurts. *Everything* hurts. But I do my best to pretend it doesn’t.

“You’re a killer, Claire. But you’re not a fox. You never will be.”

“I don’t want to be!”

I just want to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. My idea of what would make me happy has changed with time, morphing and transitioning into one simple thing: A family. I’d thought I had found one just a few nights ago, sitting next to him and Rhea on the boat. Obviously, I wasn’t deluding myself into thinking that he was in love with me or anything, but it had felt like the closest thing to a family I ever had. Probably the closest thing to family I will ever have. And now, what have I got?

“I’ve done you a disservice by trying to protect you instead of teaching you how cruel the world really is.” He presses his lips together, his gaze suddenly predatory. “I’ve lied to you about how wicked I really am to keep you from running and getting caught up in one of my traps.” His breath ghosts over my lips as his eyes rove mine. “Maybe I’ve been trying to hide it from myself, too. I’m not a fox or a doe.”

“Then what are you?” I challenge, afraid that if I even breathe wrong, he’ll break whatever spell has been cast between us. If he turns away from me—when he turns away from me—I just may break.

“A snake.” He says without hesitation. “I lay low, unseen, but powerful. I can wrap myself tight enough around you to crush the life out of you. And I can poison you as easily as I can kiss you. I already did.”

My spine straightens at the mention of poison, my stomach flipping. Was that an admission?

“Remy…” I feel dizzy, unsure what even to say, what to do. If that’s a confession, why is he giving it to me? Does he know that I know? Does he want me dead?

“Claire…” He says my name so softly that it’s hard to reconcile it with the man standing before me.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because it’s who I am.” He sighs, brushing a thumb over my lip and watching the skin part under his touch. “Because I want you to see the real

me before you decide to sleep in bed next to me again, before you let your guard down with me. Before you learn just how cruel I can really be."

"I think I'm starting to understand." I swallow.

"Good."

As if it's a reward for the admission, he pulls me against him, tangling his hands in my hair, and devours me.

Our kiss is fire and passion and hate and confusion and anger. It is lust and hunger and craving. He systematically blows past my defenses, pulls me into him, and runs away with me before I've even had a chance to catch a breath. He pulls away when I'm on the verge of blacking out and swipes a tear from my cheek, but his lips still dance over mine when he speaks again. "Every moment you're with me, you're swimming in the deep end, Claire. You could drown at any moment."

The little lift of his lips makes me think he *wants* me scared. So, I force a laugh, meeting his eyes with a similar intensity. "Lucky for me, I'm a good swimmer."

"Are you?" He doesn't miss a beat, again. Damn him.

"Excellent swimmer, actually."

"Let's find out." He shrugs.

Before I can figure out what he means, he scoops me into his arms and strides out onto the boat deck. My stomach tightens as I realize what he's implying, my eyes going wide as I try to get out of his grasp. "Remy!" I warn him.

"Time to put your money where your mouth is, sweetheart."

He doesn't give me a chance to say anything else because the next thing I know, he lifts me over the bow of the boat.

Then the warmth of his body disappears, and the icy water consumes me.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

I know she can swim. I watched her gliding through the water like she was part fish the first night I met her, the night she got shot at. That was the first night she didn’t take any of the warnings seriously. I brought her with Rhea because I thought she’d be safer, and if she mattered so much to my sister, I was obligated to protect her. I didn’t realize bringing her here would only pull her deeper into my world. But that’s exactly what it did. I pulled her into this dark world without giving her sufficient warning, and she pulled me into her.

As I watch her blonde hair disappear under the surface of the water, I ignore the twisting in my gut. I did so good for so long, pushing away feeling and emotion. I hard-wired my brain to imagine Davos straddling my unconscious girlfriend every time Monica popped into my mind. I found companionship in women content with a night of good things. I learned to crave darker interactions because they fed the beast in me created by my rage and kept it dormant.

And in a matter of weeks, this girl has come into my life and fucked with everything. I’ve been too easy on her, and she’s made me soft in general. It’s past time I remedied that, so I push the guilt away and turn to fix myself a drink while I wait for the sound of her gasping as she breaks the surface.

It happens sooner than I anticipate, the splash of the water followed by a sharp inhale of air. She’ll just be climbing on the deck from the ladder, dripping wet and pissed as a drowned cat, no doubt, by the time I pour myself some bourbon.

Except, when I walk back onto the deck with my glass in hand and a smirk on my lips, she's still not there. Panic strikes me like lightning as I consider the possibility that I went too far. What if she hit her head? What if her shorts snagged on the side of the boat and she can't free herself? I run to the bow of the boat, looking over the side in search of her, of any sign that she ever came up at all. But there's nothing.

I've set my glass down and stripped my shirt off, throwing it on the wood that's slick with rain. I'm just about to dive in when a flash of lightning illuminates the space beyond the lights, and I see her… swimming away from me.

We're still docked near the shore, but instead of swimming for the ladder on the back of the boat or the dock that would take her into the city, she is swimming further out to sea… in the middle of a thunderstorm.

What the hell is she doing?

"Claire!" I call after her, cupping my hands around my mouth in an attempt to be heard over the howl of the wind and the waves breaking against the hull.

I assume she doesn't hear me, as another peel of thunder takes that exact moment to clap around us. God, this woman is insane. She has to know she's going in the wrong direction. What does she really hope to gain by swimming into the abyss?

My irritation piqued, I hoist the anchor and decide I'm going to have to chase her. Of course, it's sketchy in this weather to motor next to an unprotected body, but she'll likely kill herself swimming out like that. At least this way, Rhea will have a body to bury, because I'm going to fucking kill this girl.

Squinting to see through the onslaught, I find her and lock my gaze on the shape of her head bobbing along the surface as I chase her. She wasn't lying. She is a great swimmer. I can't fathom how she got so far away from me in such a short time.

But no matter how fast Claire is, she can't outswim the boat. I catch her in a matter of moments, cutting her off by whipping in front of her so that she has no choice but to acknowledge me. I see her scowl when she notices me, but she doesn't even hesitate before turning to continue her path parallel to mine.

"Claire!" I yell, my anger swelling like the waves in the distance behind us. It's been raining for hours—it was before we fell asleep. But the storm

only seems to be growing in intensity, the whitecaps in the distance looking distinctly precarious.

Whether she doesn't hear me or doesn't care, I get no answer as she continues to swim away from me as if she's just doing laps in my family's pool. I could follow beside her, waiting until she tires and sucks up her pride to climb aboard. But I'm not in the mood to wait.

She doesn't hear me jump in behind her. I'm sure that she'd turn back if she had, but she just continues forward, fully focused on staying moving. She should be fully focused on keeping her head above the water though. "Claire!" I growl, anger burning in all of my limbs as she ignores me, so recklessly swimming on.

Without the protection of the boat to break the waves, they're growing choppier, faster, and bigger as they break around her small form. And she fucking swims fast, putting more distance between us than I would have even considered possible.

I'm definitely going to kill her when I catch her. Wrap my hands around that little throat and use that grip to shake her, maybe knock some sense into her.

"Just fucking stop!" I yell after her. She may be a good swimmer, but she's been in the water longer than me, and the waves push her around much more easily. She's expending at least twice as much energy as I am just to stay afloat.

Finally, she must tire a little… or maybe she just hears me for the first time, because she turns back to face me as if she's surprised I'm there. I get a moment as lightning forks overhead to take in her parted lips that I'm going to punish once I catch her.

And then a wave crashes between us and she disappears entirely.

If I'd blinked, I would have missed it. The lightning disappears just as she does, leaving only the darkness between us and the falling rain, the crashing waves.

Fuck. I swim faster, my heart hammering harder than it ever has as I try to close the distance between where she was when she went under and where I started from. But without anything around to serve as a marker, it's impossible to tell. I keep watch for any sign of her—a flash of her silvery hair, a glimpse of her jean shorts. But there's nothing, so I take a deep breath and plunge beneath a wave as it breaks, looking for those same things below the surface.

It's too dark. The ocean is pitch black at night when there are no stars or lights to distinguish anything in the abyss. It’s impossible to see where the surface even is as I glance up at it a second before pushing myself deeper. The drop-off here is steep, and I push myself as deep as I can go before the ache in my chest forces me up.

It seems to take longer to get to the surface than it did to push myself under, but when I finally break it, I suck in a breath of relief, trying to get all the air I can into my chest so that I can dive back down.

A wave crashes into me before I can go back below. Unprepared, the force knocks me loose, sending me cascading through the water. I have just enough warning to fill my lungs with air before my head goes under and the darkness returns.

It's peaceful under the water, even as I’m thrown around in the surf. The angry sounds of the sea and sky above don’t reach down here. It’s the most profound silence I’ve ever known. And yet, I know not to be entranced with it. My chest still burns with the need for air.

And Claire.

I get control of myself enough to break the surface again, spinning around to see how far that set me back. I can’t even see the shore from where I am, but the boat isn’t too far. I can get there in a matter of minutes. But if I don’t find Claire, she won’t have minutes. It could already be too late, and that makes my chest ache harder than the need for air did.

The lightning that’s been dancing in the sky, painting the clouds silver in intervals, strikes somewhere in the not-so-distant space beyond my boat. It offers me the briefest chance to see a flash of something silvery before we’re plunged in darkness again. But that flash is all I need. I swim toward it without abandon, eyes locked on the space that the night has reclaimed, moving on instinct because it’s all I’ve got.

My fingers tangle in her hair first, the web of it drawing me in. In the dark, it could be anything, but I fist it in my hand, using it to draw her against me. And as I drag her through the water, it’s clear that it’s not just anything. I’ve got *her*.

“Claire!”

Her eyes are closed, her lips parted. Maybe it’s the dark all around us, but they look blue. She doesn’t react to me, doesn’t hear me, or feel the tug on her hair. I tuck my arm around her ribcage, pulling her with me in a football hold as I swim toward the boat. This time, we’re swimming with the waves

instead of against them, and I use their momentum to propel us forward as fast as I can.

When I reach up and close a hand around the ladder, lightning hits again so close that I drop the metal, hissing when my fingers burn against the pole. Flames dance along the back of the bow, creating a ring that spreads slowly from the point of origin right where my hand was a moment before.

I grit my teeth and tighten my grip around Claire, hauling her over the side of the boat with me and letting her body drop onto the ground. I fall on top of her, tilting her head back to let the light show me the trickle of blood on her head. It's not much, and I can't even see the source, so it's the least threatening problem. I slam my hands into her chest, pumping harder than necessary. Rather a broken rib than death is what they always told us when we took our lifeguard course over the summers.

I'm just about to press my lips to hers when she gasps, her eyes flying open. I don't even get a second of relief, because she's choking on the water I just pushed out of her lungs. Spinning her face to the side, she is able to cough the water from her throat before she falls back against the deck, her body exhausted.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I growl, slamming my fist into the ground beside her head. Claire doesn't even flinch at my anger, her blue eyes focusing on mine for a moment. I think she's about to say something, and then she glances behind me.

"Fire!"

I stay focused on her just long enough to let her wonder if I'm crazy enough to let us go down in flames, and then roll off of her. The fire extinguisher is just where it always is, under the bench seat, so I whip it out and pull the pin, spraying it back and forth until the white foam coats the flames on the back of my boat and effectively kills them.

Claire is getting to her feet shakily beside me by the time I drop the extinguisher and turn to glare at her. "I'll ask you again, Claire. What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

Her jaw hardens, and I see the stubbornness in her eyes. "I told you I was a good swimmer. You wanted me to prove it, so I did."

"You didn't prove anything." I laugh because I can't help it. She's being so absurd that she can't be serious.

"I could have swam all the way back to your house if you hadn't jumped in and distracted me." Her chest heaves, and I don't know if it's from anger

or her body trying to readjust to breathing oxygen normally.

“I distracted you?” I shake my head. “You’re fucking delusional.”

“You threw me over the side of the boat!” She snaps, pointing angrily to the bow that’s been devoured by flames. “But you think *I’m* delusional? What’s the game Remy? You want me to fucking run from you?”

“You should.” I tell her honestly.

“Yeah, well, I tried. And every time, you fucking come after me.”

“You’d be dead if I hadn’t!” I growl, remembering how Wes had held the knife to her throat. The truth is, we both know she wouldn’t have been dead. They were going to keep her alive, at least for a while. But she would wish she wasn’t.

“Do you want to be the white knight or the dark prince, Remy? Cause I think you don’t even know yourself!”

Ouch.

That hits harder than I’ll let her see. I cover the pain with a laugh, so she doesn’t see me flinch. “Do you want to be the damsel in distress or the vixen in charge? Cause I’m not sure you know, either!”

I don’t know what I expect her to say back to that, but it’s not what she says. “I don’t know!” Her answer gives me a moment of silence to contemplate that, but she continues before I’ve had the chance to understand what she means. “I don’t know who I am, Remy. I never have. I look in the mirror, and I feel like…” She pauses, her breaths making her chest rise and fall quickly as she contemplates whether she wants to tell me what she’s actually thinking. “Sometimes I feel like I know who I am. And then I look in the mirror, and I see…” Her voice lowers with a sigh, “It doesn’t match the way I feel.”

I try to understand what that’s supposed to mean. I’ve heard of things like body dysmorphia and subsequent eating disorders, but I don’t think that’s what she’s trying to get at. So, I stay silent, watching her face as she struggles to find the words to help me understand.

“It’s so hard to not know who you are. I feel like I’ve never created an identity for myself—and sometimes that makes me feel like I don’t actually exist. But then there are moments—usually moments where we’re together—where I feel alive. And I feel like I know who I am.” I watch her throat work as she swallows. “And then you go and do something that makes me question myself all over again.”

“Claire—”

“It’s not fair to put it on you, Remy. I know. Because it’s not you. But—”

“But?” I prompt, needing to know where she’s going with this.

She shakes her head, turning away from me. My hand snags around her wrist, forcing her back to me. “But what?” I demand, grabbing her chin and forcing her eyes to meet mine.

I think she’s going to ignore me until she presses her quivering lips together. “But I want you to be the one who makes me see myself.”

“Claire—” I start, my voice even colder than I feel.

“I’m not asking you to love me. I don’t think anyone ever could. I’m just asking you to break me so I can put myself back together.”

I stare at her, unblinking. There’s more in that simple statement than I can even begin to wrap my head around. “You want me to… break you? So that you can put yourself back together?”

“I know it probably doesn’t make sense.” She runs her hand through her wet hair, her fingers twisting it at the scalp as she struggles to make me understand. “I think I was always fragile, probably. So, it’s no surprise that I broke. And when I did, nobody was going to come clean up the pieces for me. Nobody was going to try and shape me back together, so I just did what I could. But I clearly did something wrong because I—” Her voice breaks, and this time she does turn away from me, hurrying to the other side of the boat like she can’t possibly get enough space between us.

“Because you what?” I press, following her. She opens the door into the kitchen, but I step behind her, pressing her into the edge of the counter. My lips find her ear, my hands coming around her to pin hers against the marble. “Because what?”

Her voice shakes when she answers me. “Because I’m fucked up.”

I blink, taking a moment to let her admission settle. That’s certainly not what I expected her to say. “What?” I laugh, wrenching her chin around so that her neck tilts back to face me. But Claire isn’t laughing. Tears stream quietly down her face, and my stomach plummets. “You’re not fucked up.” I tell her, finishing the thought I’d already had. But I can tell the words glance off of her. She doesn’t believe me.

She spins to face me, pushing off the counter as leverage. Her small body presses into mine, and the burgeoning erection from a moment before turns hard. “This is fucked up.” She gestures to the finite amount of space between our bodies, and I have half a mind to devour the rest of her words in a kiss. But I don’t. I watch her. “We are *both* fucked up, Remy. But this?

Whatever the hell this is? This fucking and fighting and then repeating? It's toxic."

I never meant for it to be. She's hard to resist, and the first time we fell into one another, it had been so chaotically passionate that I didn't have a chance to think about stopping. But I know she's right. We're pushing each other, pulling so hard we're just tugging one another through a mess. "But that's not the worst part. The worst part is that I *like* it. I like that you don't love me. I like that you want to hurt me. I like that you make me want to hurt you." Claire swipes at her cheeks angrily. "That's not healthy, is it? Not normal?"

I don't know how I'm supposed to know what normal is. Maybe I knew it once, ages ago, when I had Monica. But I was an entirely different man then. My parents certainly never gave me anything to model my opinions of healthy relationships upon. "That doesn't make you fucked up," I argue, instead of answering the question.

"It does." She whispers. "I'm infected. He got under my skin and burrowed so deep I'll never get him out." Her body sobs, heaving with that idea, but her tears have stopped. "He ruined me, and now I just want someone else to ruin me better than he did."

I stare at her as she looks up at me, her eyes cold, her body colder. Her lips are still faintly blue, and I'm just realizing she's shaking. That, at least, is easily remedied. I wrap my arms around her even as she goes stiff, not wanting to accept my warmth, and hold her so tight that I think our heartbeats sync.

She's wrong about so many things. She's not fucked up, she's not damaged or unworthy. She isn't ruined or broken.

But she's right about one thing.

No matter how tight I hold her against me, I can't put her back together.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

He quit trying to fight me and just held me for a long time before we separated. His silence was more soothing than his words, and I was willing to take it for as long as he was willing to give it to me. But when my body started to turn to lead, he must have realized. He swept me up without a word, laid me in the bed I'd crawled out of hours earlier, and left. I woke up to his hand in my hair, telling me we were home.

Home.

As if.

I don't belong here. I should have left after that night on the roof when I felt myself trying to be someone I wasn't. I may not know who I am, but I know who I am *not*. And I am not the kind of girl that a man like Remington Boudreaux catches feelings for.

That's why, as soon as I make it back to the room I've been sleeping in, I start to gather everything that I brought with me.

Our walk back to the house after docking was silent, and the house is similarly quiet. It's weird after yesterday, when the house was packed full of guests and mourners and so loud, I could barely think. I didn't see Rhea or Dimitri, or even Elaine on the way back. Which means I'm either going to steal Remy's car or ask him for it. But I know I won't steal it, even if part of me wants to just to see what he'd do when he finds out.

I'm running again, but this time, I don't want him to chase me. Because he can pull me back in too easily. He's already done it, over and over. And that's not helping either of us.

My heart hammers as I set my suitcase down next to me and stare at his door, my palms sweaty. I don't want to face him. I don't want him to see that I can't handle this. And I definitely don't want him to see that somehow, in a matter of weeks, he's gotten ahold of me.

But I'm choosing the lesser of the evils, so I knock on the door anyway, fighting the impulse to turn and run before he can open it.

There's a flicker of confusion on his face when he sees me, but then his eyes drop to my luggage and his jaw tightens. "You're not leaving."

My mouth falls open without my permission, his words like a shock to the system. "Excuse me?"

"You don't have to leave, Claire." He shakes his head. "You still have a few weeks left of summer. Stay."

I shake my head, too, because I don't want to even hear his words. "No. I don't belong here."

I don't tell him I feel like I've belonged in his bed more than I feel like I've ever belonged anywhere. That certainly won't help with the goodbye. "Rhea will be devastated if she comes home, and you're gone." He crosses his arms, like that's final.

"Where is she?" I narrow my eyes on him. He's been with me most of the day and night, so I'm not sure how he'd know his sister isn't in the house somewhere.

"With Dimitri, somewhere. I didn't ask." He sounds like he'd rather not talk about that anymore. "Don't leave."

I don't want to leave as much as I do. I want him to throw me on his bed and pin me to it, fucking me until I can't even move, let alone think of running from him. And I know that's wrong, which is why I'm doing this.

"I have to."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to." He snaps. "I told you that once before."

Yeah, before we killed a man and then fucked with his blood drying on our flesh.

"I want to leave." I tell him, trying again.

His lips twist into a smirk. "I don't believe you."

"What's the point of me staying? So that we can tear each other apart for a few more weeks? If you want me dead, you'd better hurry up and do it. Your poison is too slow, too unreliable. You held a gun out to me and told me if I wanted to shoot you, I'd better not miss. This is my equivalent. If

you don’t want me to walk away from you, you’re going to have to kill me.”

I don’t blink or even hesitate when I give him my ultimatum. But neither does he. “Killing you isn’t the only way to keep you here.” Remy brings his mouth to mine, but he doesn’t kiss me. His lips brush mine with every motion they make as he whispers against them. “I could tell my sister you left and tie you up in the guest house. I have an empty cellar now that Wes is gone.”

My breath hitches at that. I know I’m not supposed to like that idea, not supposed to be burning for him to follow through on that promise. “I could tape your pretty lips so you can’t scream.”

“Remy…” I’m pretty sure the lips he’s speaking about are quivering, desperate for his kiss.

“I could give you the world.” His voice sounds different at that one, and when my eyes snap up to his, he looks as though he didn’t actually mean for that to slip out. But now that it’s said, he can’t take it back, so he doubles down. “Fuck, Claire. I *would* do it to keep you from walking away right now.”

I close my eyes because I can’t bear to see him right now as he makes promises he doesn’t intend to keep. I guess the chaos must feel as good to him as it does to me because he’s desperate to hold onto it. He can have any woman he wants, so why is he holding so tightly to me?

“I can’t do this.”

“You can do anything.” He assures me, his voice silk and velvet and everything delicious. His thumb swipes over my bottom lip, parting it from the top, and I open my eyes just in time to see him looking at me like he’s going to absolutely devour me. “And you can have everything. Just stay.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to fight him, because he crushes his mouth to mine and sweeps me against him, tugging me into his room. I hear the door shut behind me, but I can’t focus on anything other than the adrenaline racing through my veins, the hedonistic pleasure, and the crashing pain that I know will follow. “Remy…” His name is a plea on my lips, but I’m not sure what I’m asking him for.

He swallows it regardless, consuming me with his kiss as his hands trail down my sides, dipping into the waistband of the shorts I’d changed into as soon as we got back upstairs. My breath hitches in anticipation, my body going weak with submission.

I’m on my back on his bed in the next instant, parallel with the headboard, his body pressing into mine, his lips on mine so fervently that my lips are starting to go numb and my head feels dizzy. He doesn’t give me a chance to get air. He’s taking from me now, like maybe if he takes everything I have, I’ll have no reason to go. “Remy.” I tangle my fingers in his hair as he feasts on my flesh, trailing hot kisses down my neck before shoving my shirt out of his way so he can continue uninterrupted down my stomach. I’m hanging just off the edge of the bed, and he retreats to the floor. His mouth is just above my hips when he pulls my shorts and panties from me in a single move, not even bothering to free my ankle before pushing my thighs apart and spreading me with his tongue. This time, he feasts on something far more carnal, and all of my reservations, all of my resolve and reason go out the window.

I’m a helpless mess when it comes to him, and I can’t even bother to be embarrassed by it right now. The part of me that needs him is primal, so deeply ingrained that I’m not sure my attraction to him was ever a choice. It’s like my body was made for him to control, to pleasure, to take his own pleasure from. We fit so good in this way.

“You belong to me, Claire.” His hot breath whispers over my aching core, and I open my eyes to see him looking at me from between my legs. “I don’t care who’s been here before. I don’t care if you don’t want to admit it to yourself. Because your body knows. Look at how you melt for me. Look at how I’m on my knees for you. Any man or monster who has ever tried to claim you has been lying to themselves, because no one will ever crave you the way I do.”

“Remy, I…”

My voice fades away as he dives back in, pulling me into him.

He eats my pussy like a starving man desperate to live another day, and it quickly reduces me to nothing. I’m inconsequential as the orgasm builds and makes everything else cease to matter, my desperation for what he does to me (with his tongue and without it) taking over every cell in my body. I’m wound so tight that when I come, every muscle inside of me simultaneously clenches, waiting for the anticipation to end. When it does, I fall apart from a great height, pleasure and relief flooding my limbs in violent waves that threaten to tear me under like the one in the ocean. And they continue to pull at me without ceasing as he holds tight to me, refusing to let go even as I try to freefall into the pleasure.

Gasping, I do my best to pull away, unable to take anymore. I can’t even form a coherent thought, let alone a word, but it doesn’t stop me from trying. “Rem—”

He doesn’t slow, and I almost wonder if he didn’t hear me.

Pain turns sometimes to pleasure, and pleasure can similarly turn to pain as he keeps me splayed before him, sucking my swollen clit into his mouth so hard that every muscle in my body has locked, agonizingly stuck as fire works its way through my veins, a second orgasm threatening even as the overstimulation turns painful. Tears are building in my eyes, and my stomach is cramped so hard I can’t reach up to grab his hair, so I bend to the side, yanking a fistful of it between my fingers. That, at last, seems to snap him out of whatever trance he’s in, and he looks up to see me. When he releases me, it feels like he's let me out of a trance, my back falling flat against the mattress as I work to breathe in enough air to send the oxygen to the parts of me that feel they’ve been cut off from circulation.

“Stay,” he says, as if I’m capable of movement anyway. I hear the whoosh as his pants fall to the floor, and then he lines himself up with me, locking his fingers in mine before pushing into me and burying himself all the way inside. His mouth crashes over top of mine, and I can taste myself on him when his tongue slides against my own. It’s a wicked combination, his mouth and mine, our need tangling so that I don’t know where his ends and mine begins. I’m not even sure where he ends, and I begin. And I don’t care, because he drives me into the bed with the force of his thrusts, stoking something deep inside of me. The angle makes him feel deeper than any of the other times we’ve done this.

“Tell me you’re mine.” He pants, his words sweet in my ear. “Tell me you’ll stay.”

“I’m yours.” I moan, pretty sure I’d agree to anything in the moment. But I won’t tell him I’ll stay. I can’t do that to him… or me.

“Tell me you don’t need anything else.” He begs, thrusting into me with a new pace that makes it impossible to form a word. Which is convenient, because I just moan as he lifts my ass, giving him more access to me. “Tell me…”

I don’t have to tell him anything, because he comes apart in me a moment later, his thrusts slowing before they cease altogether. He doesn’t even pull out of me before collapsing on top of me and tilting my mouth to his, stealing another kiss. This one is softer, not as hungry, or as desperate.

I close my eyes, focusing on his breath as it evens out, afraid to break the spell. But one of us has to, eventually. So, I take the moment.

“I quit taking my birth control.”

He lifts his face from my chest slowly, his eyes round with shock as he wonders whether I said what he thinks I did. “You—what?”

“I quit.” I tell him calmly, watching his eyes narrow as he shoves off of me and slides out of me at the same time, leaving me uncomfortably cold. But I don’t move. I need the cold after the heat of the moment we just shared. I need to feel empty for a minute, because at least that will help prepare myself for the transition.

“Why would you do that?”

I can’t tell if he’s annoyed because we’ve been fucking without protection, or because I’ve stopped poisoning myself. Maybe both.

I don’t answer him, standing up without meeting his gaze. My stomach is twisting with what I know is about to happen, but I bombed this moment on purpose. Whatever this has been between us, it’s past its expiration.

And we both have to let go.

I shimmy into my shorts and straighten my top so that I can pretend I’ve got some dignity to hold onto as he watches me, his jaw tense. “I’m not trying to trap you, if that’s what you think.” I tell him, ignoring the way I can feel his cum slipping between my thighs. “It was tainted.”

“Tainted?” He scoffs, like he has no idea what that means. And maybe he doesn’t. I’d suspected Elaine of being the one to poison me, slipping a little anthrax or rat poison into my drinks little by little. Maybe it was her who switched my birth control, though I don’t know why she would possibly want to do that.

“Mm.” I nod. “Tainted. I stopped taking it this morning. We’ll be fine today, I’m sure. But that’s the last time.”

He glares at me in confusion as I try to stalk past him, snaring my arm and making me face him. “What the hell?”

He thinks he had me. He thinks we can just keep destroying one another as if we’re infinite and not so easy to shatter. Maybe he’s not, but I am.

“You told me before you’d never love me. So why do you care if I go?”

It’s a brutal question. He flinches when I ask it, but I deserve an answer. I don’t understand what force threw us together, but it doesn’t seem to be cupid’s arrow. There was just as much hate as love in him when he threw me on the bed in the boat and fucked my ass.

“I don’t know.” He says, with an honesty I can’t fault him for.

I can’t explain it either. But I do know that regardless of who I am or who I’m going to be, there’s no world where we make this work. We’ve lived in a bubble the last few weeks, isolated from the world, from responsibility. I have school to think about, a future to plan, a life to create for myself. And I’d never be able to do that if I’m living for what he gives me. I already know he’ll never give me the one thing I want more than anything, the one thing he blanches at the mention of despite all those pretty promises about giving me everything. “I want a family.”

He doesn’t miss a beat, which further proves that I’m right in this. “You have a family. Rhea… me.”

“And I love her.” I tell him, my pulse thundering over the word *love* as I focus all my energy on making sure the last word comes out right. “But she can’t give me what I want.”

As brilliant as he is, he’s thick enough that he stares at me like he can figure out what I want just by looking at me. “Kids. A family.” I shake my head, trying to deny the pricking at the back of my eyes.

“Kids?” He laughs, like the idea had never even crossed his mind. “You’d bring children into this world, even knowing how wicked it is?”

The question feels like an accusation, like he’s telling me I’m selfish to want something so trivial. It hurts worse than I could imagine. My chest feels heavy, and it’s like shards of glass are flying around inside my ribcage. “I have no one in this world. I’ve always felt like half a person, like something is missing. If you hadn’t found me before Wes got me on that plane—”

“But I did—”

“And if you hadn’t, the only person who would have missed me was Rhea. There’s no one waiting up for me to call to let them know when my plane lands safely. There’s no one to tell me to not stay out all night, to give me a band aid when I’m hurt, to—”

“To put you back together when you break.” His voice is low, quiet without the outrage from moments earlier. Understanding starts to dawn on his face, slowly. “I could be that person for you.”

“No, you can’t. It’s too late for that. I already told you, I can put myself back together. I may not get it perfect, but I can do it. But I want to be that person for someone else. I want to be the one that tells them things they already know, that demands a call so I can know they’re safe, that puts band

aids on knees and puts people back together when they break. Or better yet, I can keep them from breaking at all."

He looks like he wants to argue, but he presses his lips together instead. "You want to be a mother."

"It's the only thing I know about myself definitively." I nod. "And you don't want to be a father, right?"

I don't think he's said as much. He hasn't had to. This isn't the kind of home you raise kids in. This isn't the sort of life you bring a child into.

"It's the only thing I know about myself, definitively." He sighs, mirroring mine. There's a beat of silence as we both consider what this means, as if we were ever going to be anything more than a toxic fling. "So, where does this leave us?"

"Back where we started." I tell him. "You're my best friend's brother. There isn't any future between us. And I'm going home."

I watch his knuckles curl into fists at his side, and then his abs flex as he reaches up to run his hands through his hair. "Claire, don't do this."

"There's nothing left to say." I assure him gently. "It's fine. If you want to call me a taxi, we won't even have to sit together all the way to the airport."

"I'm not sending you to the airport." He snaps. I'm exhausted, tired of this fight already, so I'm grateful when he relents, his shoulders slumping. "I'll call Simon to come get you."

"Don't be ridiculous." I almost laugh. I don't know where his pilot spends most of his time, but asking him to fly all the way to Costa Rica just to take me home to Oregon sounds insane. He'd likely be tired by the time he even gets here. "I'll fly economy and I'll be just fine."

"I don't even know if there's a flight soon. Sometimes there are days between them, and if there is one, it's probably to JFK or Atlanta, which means you'll have a layover and—"

"There's a flight leaving in the morning." I say quietly. "And I'll be on it, whether you drive me there or I have to walk the whole way."

The defeat in his gaze as he watches me hurts as much as the denial, which has faded now as he realizes he has no choice but to accept this.

"When do you have to go?"

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

No matter how hard I insisted, he refused to just drop me at the airport.

No, as if the hour before I left and the drive to the airport in stony silence weren't torturous enough, he parks the car and jumps out, pulling the gun out of the back of his pants and putting it in the glove box between us.

Remy must notice my eyes on him because he looks up to meet my eyes. "Can't take a gun through security, Claire. Not even me."

I have so many questions, not the least of which is why the hell he brought a gun with him to do something as menial as deliver me to the airport. Was he planning on driving me to the middle of nowhere and pulling that trigger? The question that comes out of my mouth, though, is just one word. "Security?"

"Security." He nods, straightening the collar of his suit jacket. I feel woefully underdressed in his presence, and not in the way that I like to be. I'm wearing cutoffs and a crop top, just casual and comfortable enough to last a long flight. But Remington Boudreaux is back in his fancy black suit, cold and closed off, as if we're complete strangers without any history between us. Though, to be fair, our history is brief. In the grand scheme of our lives, this time together was barely a blip on the radar, no matter how grand it felt. "I'm escorting you to the gate."

I start to protest, but he shuts the door, closing me off from him. He's at the trunk, pulling my bag out of the back, and I have a feeling if I wait, he'll come do the same thing to me. Maybe he wants to be sure I get on the flight, needs to see it for himself. And I suppose that's fair, considering the

last time I tried to come here, I was intercepted and sold off to some sadistic fuck whose identity I still don't know. I decide to spare him the trouble of dragging me out, too, and go to join him at the back of the car.

He doesn't let me take the suitcase from him, clicks the key fob to lock the door, and then leads me to the squat building ahead of us. I follow him, not knowing what to do with myself, trying hard to deny the tension still between us. I'm not sure it's sexual anymore. Now it seems to border on frustration, annoyance, anger. There's nothing left between me and my best friend's brother, so I just need to get him out of my head. That's exactly why I'm going home without Rhea, knowing she'll be pissed when she figures out what I did.

I cross my arms around my middle and follow him to the bag check, through security, where I think he'll finally leave me, and to the gate where he slings into the only set of open seats and pulls his phone from his pocket. We haven't said a single word to each other since coming in, and it feels as weird to sit next to him as it would to take the other empty seat closer to the desk. Through the huge windows, I can see the plane lined up, as if they're just waiting for the approval to start boarding. Most people are standing, so I stay standing, too, watching anxiously for the first sign it's time for me to board.

That sign comes just a few moments later, when the Gate Attendant calls for all passengers in business class and Remy clears his throat. "That's you."

I stare at him for a moment, then glance back at the people in crisp suits and nice slacks and dressy tops queuing up. "I'm not on business." And I guarantee everyone will know that, based upon my attire.

"I upgraded you to business class." He says briskly, as if that's that. And I guess it is, because he just stares at me, waiting for an argument or something. I just nod as he rises, standing so that he towers over me.

We're close enough I think he can hear my heart racing, the anxiety of flying again mixing with the nerves of saying goodbye to him. "There aren't assigned seats, so just go find a spot you can get comfortable in. The flight attendant will help you if you have any questions."

I'm supposed to go, to turn away, but I'm helplessly rooted to the spot. I don't know what I'm waiting for, but it feels unfinished. It's like something is missing from the moment—a hug, a kiss, a handshake? I settle on forcing a smile. "Thank you."

It feels woefully inadequate to say thank you. Those two words can't even begin to encompass whatever happened between us, or to express gratitude for the fact that he saved my life. It's not even a valid show of appreciation for this man walking me through security and sitting at the gate beside me. But it's all that comes from my tongue before it feels like it will shrivel up inside my mouth.

I see his eyes darken, his jaw tighten, but he says nothing. So, I turn and make my way to the woman standing at the podium, her hair held back by a silk scarf and a smile on her face that's so brilliant I want to cringe away from it. Looking at her is like opening my eyes to the sun directly overhead, but I manage something that she accepts as a smile as she nods me on.

It takes everything in me not to look behind me, not to turn back and cast one last glimpse at the man who tore my world apart in the space of a few weeks. It's not until I'm slinking into a comfortable leather seat at the back of the business class section that it hits me that I'm not going to be able to forget him no matter how hard I try.

Remington Boudreaux is, without a doubt, my first love. At twenty, I've finally found someone I could give myself to without reservation.

And now, I have to let him go. First love doesn't last. It's there to teach you what to look for, and what to run from, but it's not meant to last a lifetime.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the window shade, feeling a single tear slip down my face. I don't have the energy to wipe it away, so I let it fall and wish that I could just open my eyes and wake up in my bed back at the Boudreaux's family home. But it was never my bed. It was his, the whole time.

I feel someone slide into the seat next to me, and for one wild second, I entertain the idea that Remy decided he can't let me go, that this was a mistake, that he's going to drag me off this flight whether I want him to or not. But the air doesn't smell like him, and my skin doesn't prickle with awareness as it usually does when he's near, like the electric charge between us just flares up on its own.

When I open my eyes, there's a moment of confusion as I try to place the face of the man that's staring at me.

And then it comes back to me all at once—the wake, the man who watched me so strangely.

The senator.

He grins when recognition floods me, hand in hand with cold terror at what that means.

There’s no way this is a coincidence. He confirms as much when he cocks his head, looking at me from a new angle. There’s something in his gaze I can’t name, but it makes my stomach squirm. My chest feels heavy, the panic making everything sharp and cruel. “You.” I say, because it’s all that my dry mouth will allow to slip out.

He only laughs, the grin deepening on one side of his face. “Looks like I’ve finally got you alone.”

OceanofPDF.com

For more information about what's next, group therapy, or just for funsies, join us at Carly Claire's Coven on Facebook.

Need more Remy? Join my email list for a free novella to learn all about the darkness that forged Remy in this DARK prequel.

https://dl.bookfunnel.com/h2pul15bna

OceanofPDF.com

Table of Contents

1. Remy
2. Claire
3. Remy
4. Claire
5. Remy
6. Claire
7. Remy
8. Claire
9. Remy
10. Claire
11. Remy
12. Claire
13. Claire
14. Remy
15. Remy
16. Claire
17. Remy
18. Claire
19. Remy
20. Claire
21. Remy
22. Claire
23. Remy
24. Claire
25. Remy
26. Claire
27. Claire
28. Remy
29. Claire
30. Claire
31. Remy
32. Claire
33. Remy
34. Claire

35. Remy
36. Claire
37. Remy
38. Claire
39. Claire
40. Remy
41. Claire
42. Remy
43. Claire
44. Claire
45. Remy
46. Claire
47. Remy
48. Claire
49. Claire
Join the Coven!

OceanofPDF.com